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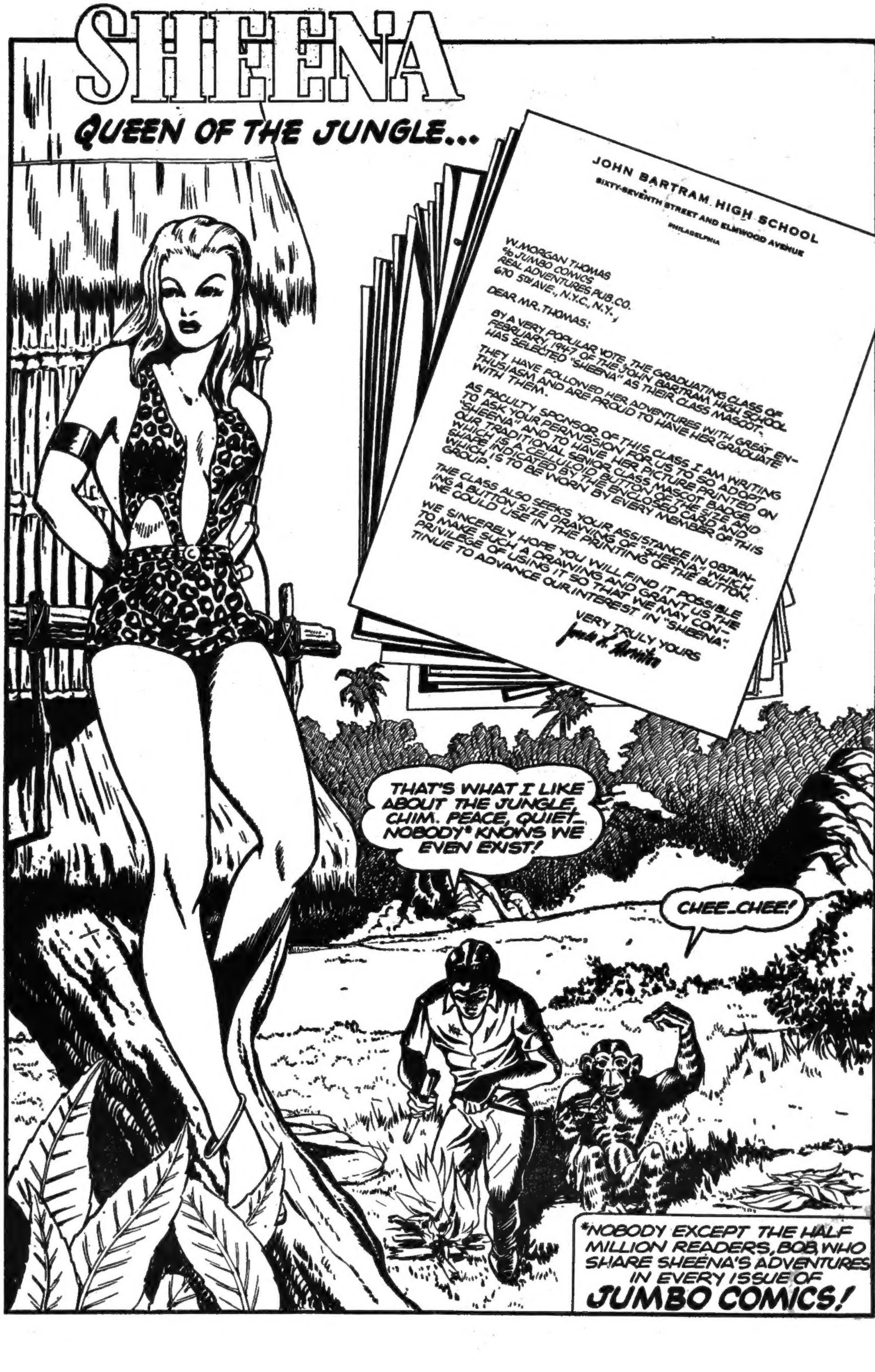
FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINES

BLEACHED BONES AT SCALP-KNIFE STATION
by L. P. HOLMES

CAPTAIN BUCKSKIN
Complete Action Novel by DAN CUSHMAN


SHEENA
QUEEN OF THE JUNGLE...
JOHN BARTRAM HIGH SCHOOL
SIXTY-SEVENTH STREET AND ELMWOOD AVENUE
PHILADELPHIA
W. MORGAN THOMAS
% JUMBO COMICS
REAL ADVENTURES PUB. CO.
670 5th AVE., N.Y.C., N.Y.,
DEAR MR. THOMAS:
BY A VERY POPULAR VOTE, THE GRADUATING CLASS OF FEBRUARY, 1947 OF THE JOHN BARTRAM HIGH SCHOOL HAS SELECTED "SHEENA" AS THEIR CLASS MASCOT.
THEY HAVE FOLLOWED HER ADVENTURES WITH GREAT ENTHUSIASM AND ARE PROUD TO HAVE HER GRADUATE WITH THEM.
AS FACULTY SPONSOR OF THIS CLASS I AM WRITING TO ASK YOUR PERMISSION FOR US TO SO ADOPT "SHEENA" AND TO HAVE HER PICTURE PRINTED ON OUR TRADITIONAL SENIOR CLASS MASCOT BADGE, WHICH IS A CELLULOID BUTTON OF THE SIZE AND SHAPE INDICATED BY THE ENCLOSED CARD AND WHICH IS TO BE WORN BY EVERY MEMBER OF THIS GROUP.
THE CLASS ALSO SEEKS YOUR ASSISTANCE IN OBTAINING A BUTTON SIZE DRAWING OF "SHEENA" WHICH WE COULD USE IN THE PRINTING OF THE BUTTON.
WE SINCERELY HOPE YOU WILL FIND IT POSSIBLE TO MAKE SUCH A DRAWING AND GRANT US THE PRIVILEGE OF USING IT SO THAT WE MAY CONTINUE TO ADVANCE OUR INTEREST IN "SHEENA".
VERY TRULY YOURS
THAT'S WHAT I LIKE ABOUT THE JUNGLE, CHIM. PEACE, QUIET— NOBODY* KNOWS WE EVEN EXIST!
CHEE—CHEE!
*NOBODY EXCEPT THE HALF MILLION READERS, BOB, WHO SHARE SHEENA'S ADVENTURES IN EVERY ISSUE OF JUMBO COMICS!

Frontier Stories

Reg. U. S. Pat. Office

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CAPTAIN BUCKSKIN

By DAN CUSHMAN

A thousand yelling savages thundered down on the little fort. Arrows hailed through the air—and men began to die. The paleface must learn not to enter Blackfoot land. But fur trader Boone Clifton had come to stay.

FOR WEEKS the steamboat *Western Hope* had churned the silt-gray waters of the Missouri, her headway slow against the spring flood. It was on the last afternoon of May that she rounded a point overgrown with cottonwoods and the pilot shoved his head out to shout, "That's her! Roll out, you mud-scow lub-

Too late, Levet saw the tomahawk.

bers and take a look at the metropolis of the Nor'west."

Men flocked to the cargo and boiler decks —river boatmen in dungarees, hunters in buckskin, negro firemen stripped to the waist.

After a couple of minutes the last saplings of the point moved by, and the sprawling stockades, blockhouses and shanties of Fort Yellowstone came into view.

The sight brought a shout from the men. One rangy freehunter with ringlets down his back did a polka step in his soft moccasins and sang,

I got a gal in Natchez
And two wives with yaller hair
But I'd rather have a brown-eyed lass
From the lodge of the Del-a-ware.

"You-all won't find no Delaware heah, Mist' Pizon," grinned a negro. "These is Sioux gals."

"Sioux or Delaware, it don't make much difference," yipped Pizon. "Injuns are pretty much the same, I reckon. Except Blackfeet."

A little man with a face like Cree-tanned leather came from the texas and looked

across the Missouri with squinty eyes. He was dressed in buckskins; at his waist was a tomahawk thrust in a belt of snake-skin which was decorated with wisps of human hair. A moment later, stooping to miss the texas door, came a man of twenty-five or thirty. He too carried a tomahawk at his waist.

"Thought the fur companies had fixed up their feud and divided the West between 'em," muttered Pizon to a second free-hunter, thumbing at the tall young man. "Look at the *bourgeois,* yonder. It's the first time he's strapped on his tomahawk since we left Mandan country."

"Maybe he wants to look dressed up for the gal."

Pizon grunted, walked to his bedroll, and drew out his own tomahawk. He'd seen the day when Levet, Boushon & Co. who owned that fort yonder weren't too friendly with men of Western Fur, and he wasn't the type who took unnecessary chances.

The *bourgeois,* Boone Clifton, stood by the rail, tall and poker-faced, watching the fort.

IT HAD degenerated some since he last visited it three seasons back. There were holes in the stockade large enough for a small Indian to slide through, and clumps of sagebrush had taken root between its rear and the grayish clay cut-banks to the south. A stockade, according to Boone Clifton's ideas, should become stronger every year, and the ground around it should be kept free of cover as an army parade ground. He'd heard that Ron MacTavish, *bourgeois* here at Fort Yellowstone, had been tilting the bottle, and the appearance of the place seemed to prove it.

He raised a spyglass to his eye and studied the people who were running toward the steamboat dock. His eye studied the stockade, and came to a stop. There, walking from a large, two-story building of gnarled cottonwood logs, came a girl.

Her dark hair was parted in the middle and drawn back in two braids like an Indian woman's and her dress was of fringed and beaded antelope skin, but despite this it was evident that little of her blood was Indian.

Boone Clifton's hand trembled a little and he lowered the glass. He seemed impatient that the boat was taking so long. Wappu Franchette, the little man with scalp hair fluttering from his belt, looked up and smiled,

"Thees las' mile, she's hardes' one of all?" he asked with a strong *homme-du-Nord* accent. "I tell without eyeglass you see MacTavish's pretty daughtaire. I tell this jus' by look in your face, my *bourgeois.*"

"You're too smart, Franchette. That's why your hair will end up on some red man's medicine-stick."

Wappu Franchette patted his hair, "Oh-ho! Me, I will sleep my long tam to judgement with plenty hair."

Boone Clifton would have wagered the fur of a November beaver against the tail of a buffalo that Wappu Franchette would die with a trade barb in his gizzard, but he didn't take time to argue. Something up in the stockade drew his eye back to the glass.

Mary MacTavish was not walking alone —nor with her father. She was walking with a finely-built white man of about thirty, a man so handsome and so lordly in bearing that the muscles of Boone Clifton's jaw knotted under his copper-brown skin. He handed the glass to Wappu Franchette. "Who is that fellow?"

Franchette fiddled with the adjustment while Boone shifted uneasily from one moccasin to the other. "Ha!" cried Franchette, and handed back the glass.

"Well?"

"Those man? Shonard Levet, as you have already guess."

"Shonard Levet is 'supposed to be at Pierre's Hole."

"But maybe the maidens they are not so lovely at Pierre's Hole, no?"

Boone's jaw set harder than ever for a moment, then he relaxed and smiled down on his companion. "I'm not worried about Mary. She's not the kind who would be fooled by a fellow like Levet."

The steamboat entered the quiet backwater of a small bay, her engines were cut, and she glided through shallow water with a dissonant clanging of pilot bells.

Her side thumped against the log mooring pier, and she shivered to rest. A plank was run ashore, but most of the men ignored it, they were so anxious to feel earth beneath their moccasins. Mary MacTavish

ran the last hundred steps and stopped, looking eagerly along the deck.

"Mary!" shouted Boone from above.

She looked up, smiling. A step behind her stood Shonard Levet, smoking a thin, New Orleans panatella. He caught Boone's eye and lifted one forefinger in greeting. His musing expression, his attitude of confidence, made Boone unsure of himself. It occurred to him that all was not well at Fort Yellowstone.

He descended the stairs leading from the small hurricane-deck, his fingers feeling a folded piece of parchment inside the pocket of his buckskin jacket. Until this moment, the parchment had seemed important—but that had been a St. Louis way of looking at things. Something about Shonard Levet changed all that. Things were different here, along the wild upriver. Agreements were nothing unless backed by powder and ball.

This parchment, an agreement between Shonard Levet's aged uncle and Donald MacMillan, the *grand bourgeois* of the Western Fur Company, might well be only a worthless scrap of sheep's hide to these men of the mouth of the Yellowstone. In the fur trade of the 1830's, it was true that one hand of a company often knew little of what the other hand was doing.

"Mary!" Boone paused a long stride away, looking at her. For the moment he forgot Levet.

TWO YEARS before he had met Mary MacTavish at a ball given by the Bentons. She had been dressed in French lace which fell in filmy cascades to the ballroom floor, but she was every bit as beautiful now in the fringed antelope skin of Indian country.

He had held her in his arms that night back in St. Louis. He had kissed her while the chaperones were busy with their gossip and, lately, through the long weeks of the trip upriver, he had dreamed of kissing her again. But now, on this crowded dock, and with that musing smile on Levet's face, he could see it was out of the question.

He took her hands, browned by the West country sun, and looked down at her. She was not such a girl now. She was more full, more womanly. He wanted to say something that would tell her how he felt, but the only words to come were, "Mary, I've thought of you so much..."

He looked beyond her shoulder and met the gaze of Shonard Levet.

Mary said, "This is Shonard Levet. He is—"

"We have met," said Levet in a voice as soft as ermine. "Mr. Clifton is an old —friend of mine."

He gave the word "friend" subtle enunciation. Shonard Levet hated Boone, although the two had not exchanged a hundred words in their lives. He had been *bourgeois* at Henry's Fort on the Platte, and Boone, then working as traveling inspector for old Pierre Levet, had gone to the up-country to learn who had been trading "strong water" to the Cheyennes. He had intercepted a string of bullboats loaded with alcohol that Shonard Levet had ordered, and since then Shonard had hated him.

"You are with Levet, Boushon & Company, and this is our boat?" asked Shonard, knowing quite well it was Western Fur.

"I am with Western," said Boone shortly. "Your uncle and Western have made an agreement. I have a copy of it to deliver to Ron MacTavish." He said to Mary, "Your father, is he well?"

She hesitated, a troubled furrow building up above the bridge of her fine nose. "He is—well," she said.

"What are the terms of the agreement?" asked Levet.

"Levet, Boushon & Company is turning the Blackfoot trade over to us. The mouth of the Milk River is to be our dividing line."

"Ho," said Levet. That was all, but his eyes said much more.

Hunters from the fort, and a dozen lodges of Assiniboines started a pow-wow, and it was going in fine style by the time Boone, Levet and the girl reached the stockade gate. Whisky was contraband, but a jug of it was dug up from somewhere, and the throb of many tom-toms soon echoed along the flat lands of the Missouri.

Inside the stockade were a dozen buildings of assorted sizes, none of them new except one with a steeple where Father Benedict, a Jesuit, had carried his cross.

The "great hall," a building of considerable size, stood at the center of the enclosure. Inside, it was dim and cool,

and filled with the thousand odors of a trading post. Levet led the way up some stairs and rapped at a door. "Ron MacTavish!" he called.

"Coom in, m'lad!" came the answer in a thick, Scotch accent.

An odor of alcohol rolled from the room when the door opened. Ron MacTavish was sitting at a table with an unstoppered jug in front of him. He was fifty or so, shaggy gray, with a face which was red from continual drinking. When he saw Boone Clifton he rose instantly, fumbling to button his blue, fusileers coat.

"Aye, Boone, so ye have returned to the old company after all!"

"I'm not with Levet & Boushon. I am with Western Fur. I'm chief *bourgeois* for their upper Missouri division."

Ron struck the table with his fist. "Weel, mon, we fight hard, but we fight fair. No strong water to the Indians, mind ye, and no guns, but if ye violate the code, I'll have your hair at me belt before—"

"Father! Boone is a guest."

"Aye, and I'll treat him so." Ron exhaled and said, "Will ye have a dram of the bottle for old time's sake?"

Boone drank the liquor, and drew the parchment from his pocket. "I have a copy of an agreement to show you."

With fumbling fingers, MacTavish unfolded the parchment. Then he handed it to Mary. "M'eyes blur, Mary. Read it to me."

Mary read slowly—an agreement between Pierre Levet and the St. Louis manager of Western Fur, agreeing to divide the upper Missouri country between them.

"Let me see the note!" roared MacTavish. He carried it to the window so the light from the setting sun fell on it. "Aye! it is the signature of old Pierre." He turned on Boone, "Aye, yes! Your lips are straight, but there is a smile in your heart. Ye have always hated the old company because ye were no made *bourgeois* at the Mandan Fort—"

"Father!"

"Weel, tak your Blackfoot trade, and the devil with ye. Eagle Rib and his thousand braves will come down one night from the yellow clay hills and there will be no more of Western in the upper Missouri."

Boone only smiled.

II

HE LEFT, Mary trying to quiet her father. Outside, Shonard Levet stopped and faced him, bowing a little from the hips. "My *bourgeois!* I would see you on a matter of mutual importance."

Levet bowed again and led the way to the banquet house, so called because in former years it had been used by the partners of the company for great feasts when they arrived on the keel boats to visit this most far-flung of outposts. Inside it was cool and dark like a cave.

"Forgive me for not lifting the draperies," smiled Levet, waving at the tiny clefts of windows covered by velvet curtains. He struck a spark from flint and fanned tinder to blaze. Capturing the flame on a splinter, he carried it to the wicks of a dozen candles in a candelabra. "I am a romantic man, and I dread disturbing the ghosts of the company's former splendor."

He set the light on a long table of hewn cottonwood and bowed, "Won't you sit at my right hand, my *bourgeois?*"

Boone Clifton sat down and waited.

"Things are not well with the affairs of Levet, Boushon & Company when it must retreat from the rich headwaters, no?"

Boone shrugged, "Those are your company affairs."

Levet's lips twisted, and some of the superficiality fell away from him. "Come, we can talk straight out to each other."

"That's what I'd like."

"My uncle, Pierre Levet, is old. He has no children, but many nephews. He will die—this year, next year, the year after. Very well. I will come into my share—perhaps a tenth. That might be well enough for some, but it is not enough for Shonard Levet! Do you see what I am driving at?"

"I'm beginning to."

"Yes. We are men, we two. We have fought the Crow and the Blackfoot. We have drunk our share at the rendezvous at Pierre's Hole. We are not St. Louis fops with sleeves of Holland Lace. We would control the Missouri—we *three.*"

"Who is the third?"

"His highness—prince alcohol."

"Am I wrong in supposing that 'His

Highness' has already made one conquest here at Fort Yellowstone?"

"Over Ron MacTavish, that weakling? It was an easy victory. One need but put the stuff beneath his nose."

Boone's face was inscrutable, his eyes meeting Levet's. Levet went on. "We both know that neither of our concerns could stand two years of failure, yet that is what we could give them. We could trade their trinkets for them while we trade alcohol for ourselves. Think of it, two years and we could own the fur trade of the West." He smiled, "You are indeed fortunate to have met a man of my vision."

"Yes," answered Boone dryly.

"However, I am giving much, and you but little. There is still one thing. I am going to have Mary MacTavish."

"You will have Mary MacTavish if she chooses you, and I shall have her if she chooses me!" Boone Clifton spoke quietly, but the intensity of his voice made it carry to every corner of the big, empty room. "And, as for your scheme, you can go to the devil with it."

For the first time the suave smile left Levet's face. He leaned forward, his magnificently muscled forearms on the table, his fists doubled and knuckles showing white.

Levet was feared from the Platte to Pend Oreille for the destructive fury of his temper, and that fury showed in his face now. His eyes dilated, his lips went gray, his skin looked purple-spotted under the unnatural mixture of sun and candlelight. He rose a few inches from his chair, then, with a sharp movement, he hooked it with his toe and sent it spinning backward to splinter against the wall.

He lunged with the quickness of a cougar, but Boone shifted a few inches to throw him off. They collided and staggered into the open. Boone moved back and smashed his left fist to Levet's jaw. But Levet dropped his head to take the blow with his teeth, carving the skin of Boone's knuckles so they dripped blood.

The two men faced each other, a match in height and weight, a match in muscle that had been drawn and tempered by years in the wild fastness of the fur country.

Levet advanced cautiously after that first rush, shifting from side to side for an opening. Boone put him back with another left. He came up with a right which connected to drive Levet to his heels.

Levet cursed and sprang, swinging a foot to Boone's jaw. Boone was taken off guard. He went down over a chair. He rolled to his back, expecting Levet to leap in with both feet, but instead Levet's hand came from beneath his jacket holding a long-bladed Kentucky knife.

Levet pounced with the knife. He did not drive for the heart. Instead, he swung up with a thrust designed to disembowel his opponent. Boone shifted, catching the point of the knife with the bottom of the chair which had been splintered in falling. He rolled over to all fours, drawing his black-handled tomahawk from its scabbard.

Levet smiled, showing his teeth like a wolf, "So now it is as you would like it, eh, Clifton? I have heard it said you are the best tomahawk man west of the Mandan villages."

"You may quit whenever you choose."

"*I* quit? You are being a fool, Clifton. I never quit, and I never lose. But neither do I take the foolish chance. You get what I am talking about?"

Boone waited, set for some trick.

"Oh-ho! Yes, I could kill you with my knife, but it would be taking a chance, and I have much to live for. For wealth, for power. I shall be the king of St. Louis as no Benton, nor Chouteau, nor Levet before me ever was. A beautiful woman shall be mine to bear my children! No, Clifton. You will die, but I will take no chance. The thick walls will muffle your screams."

Boone's eyes shifted around the room, but he could see no danger. He looked into the eyes of Shonard Levet. Levet, smiling in triumph, lifted one finger toward the rafters. Boone's eyes followed the direction of that finger, and there, crouched on the top of a massive timber, was an Indian with hawklike, Piegan features.

HE WAITED up there on soft moccasins, a bow in his hands, an arrow notched to the string. His face was inscrutable, but his eyes were like brands from a fire.

Levet bowed from the hips, "Permit me to present my friend, Weasel Head. He

is a Blackfoot of the Piegan tribe from the country where you would have gone. He has an arrow to present you."

The temptation was to spring toward the cover of the table, but it was four strides away, and the arrow would come as swift as a shaft of light to cut him down. He stood still for the time required for two breaths, the tomahawk still in his hand.

Weasel Head's eyes were on Levet more than his quarry. He was awaiting his signal. But Levet, prolonging his satisfaction with this moment, delayed giving it.

Boone twisted his wrist, flinging the tomahawk at the candelabra, springing toward the wall with a continuous movement. Weasel Head had foreseen some sort of move like this, but he had expected Boone to leap toward the table. He bent his bow, but the arrow was not released. It took a moment to reverse himself and swing in the opposite direction. The candelabra was wrecked and swept to the far wall. A glimmer of candleflame, and then dark. Weasel Head tried to locate his target, but for the moment his eyes flickered.

Shonard Levet cursed and charged with his knife. An arrow stabbed the floor at his toes and trembled there on its slim, feathered shaft.

"It is me you are shooting at!" he screamed in a fury.

Levet collided with the wall where Boone should have been. He groped as his eyes became accustomed to the dim light. By that time Boone was at the other side of the room and had recovered his tomahawk.

Weasel Head's hand flew up from his quiver with another arrow; he fitted it to the string and bent the bow. But at the same moment Boone hurled his tomahawk. It struck beneath the ribs at Weasel Head's left side. The arrow came, but it flew wild, sinking its iron trade-head deep into the wall planking. Weasel Head shrieked and toppled over backward to the floor. He lay there, writhing, his fingers clawing at the tomahawk wound.

Boone spun to face Levet. Both men stopped to listen. There was a sound of running feet outside.

Levet cursed. He stalked to the door, keeping watch of Boone from the side of his eyes. Someone tried the door latch, and hammered on the panels. Levet opened it and was faced by a couple of the subclerks.

"It was nothing," he said. "Cannot my friend and I engage in a friendly contest without your interference?"

Levet stood by the door, smoothing his shirt, and watching them leave. He turned and strode back to stand over Weasel Head. He picked up Boone's black-handled tomahawk and stuck it in his own belt.

"If you speak to Mary or Ron MacTavish about this, I'll have you hanged from the gate bar."

"I don't need their help to beat you."

"That," answered Levet, with one of his suave smiles, "remains to be seen."

III

LEVET walked directly to the great hall, climbed the stairs, and entered Ron MacTavish's room. Ron was asleep on a couch.

"Wake up!" said Levet.

Ron sat up, making a wry face. He got to his feet and took a drink from the whisky jug. It seemed to help him, for then he managed a smile. "Yes, Shonard, m'lad?"

"Do you know what that steamboat of Boone Clifton has in her hold?"

"I do not."

"Alcohol—and guns."

"Ye mean he's fixin' to trade alcohol to the Blackfeet?"

"What else could he intend?"

"How do ye know, m'lad?"

"One of his men told me."

"Na, lad. I hate the Western Fur as much as any man, but Boone Clifton would na trade such with the cursed Blackfeet. They would end by killing him, and us in the bargain. I'll not believe it."

Fury mounted in Shonard Levet's face. He reached forward and seized MacTavish by the front of his wrinkled fusileer's coat and held him at arm's length, "You doubt my word?"

"Na, lad. It is not your word I doubted. Ye did na say ye saw the guns and alcohol yoursel'. Ye only said a man told—"

"He is a man I can trust."

"And what do ye wish me to do?"

"To do what my uncle would want you to do—sink that steamboat before she has a chance to get upriver."

Ron MacTavish pulled away and sat down on the couch. He looked up into the eyes of Levet. He had always feared Levet a little, and that fear showed now. But for all that, he was still *bourgeois*—he was still running the Company affairs at Fort Yellowstone.

"I will go look m'sel."

"You think Boone will let you look?"

"If he will na', then I'll know what ye speak is true."

"I say sink the boat!"

MacTavish was obdurate, "I will na'."

"Damn you, I won't—"

"Levet!" He sprang to his feet. In all his years as *bourgeois* with the Company, no man had spoken such words to him and lived. He would not allow them to be spoken now—not even by the nephew of the *grand bourgeois* himself. "I will ha' ye to know I am still in command at this fort. Noo go and leave me before I ha ye strapped to the gate and lashed for every Indian to see!"

"You would do that?" asked Levet with quiet amusement.

"Aye! as I ha done wi' mony a man before."

Levet laughed. He drew the black-handled tomahawk from his belt and hefted it. MacTavish, watching him, did not seem to suspect what was in his mind. He started to say something more, then he paused abruptly, his eyes fascinated by the bright steel.

"Na, lad. Think what ye—"

His breath hissed with a sudden exhalation as the tomahawk head swung down. He toppled forward over his desk and rolled to the floor.

There was no change in the expression on Levet's face. He tossed the weapon to one side, walked to the rear window, and leaned out. It was twilight, and nothing was in sight except a stretch of the rear stockade. He swung out and dropped softly to the ground fifteen feet below.

He did not immediately go around to the front. He followed the shadow of the stockade as far as the rear of the banquet hall. He entered by a small back door. It was dark inside, but the sound of Weasel Head's breathing was enough to guide him.

"This is the second time I have saved your life, Weasel Head," Levet said in the dialect of the Blood tribe of the Blackfeet. "Do not forget your debt to me."

"I will kill him for you someday," muttered Weasel Head. "The Blood always pays his debts."

Levet found a couple of loose pickets, lifted them from their holes, and dragged Weasel Head through. There was no sentry on duty, so he carried the Indian to an old root cellar back against the bluffs. Then he returned and asked the first man he met, "Have you seen Boone Clifton lately, or is he still with MacTavish?"

BOONE CLIFTON left the banquet hall and set out to find Mary MacTavish. He was told that she had left with the wife of a clerk to visit a sick squaw in one of the Assiniboine lodges by the river. The lodge was a half-mile away, and night had almost settled when he got there.

Light from a tallow lamp showed through the seams of one of the teepees, and women were chanting inside. He drew up, recognizing the chant for what it was. Not even the greatest war chief of the Assiniboines would have dared to enter against that chant. It meant that the tribe was being blessed with a new warrior.

He wondered why Mary had come. Childbirth in the lodges of the Assiniboines was not so unusual as to require the attention of the *bourgeois'* aristocratic daughter.

Father Benedict emerged from the low entrance of the teepee, rolling down the sleeves of his robe and wiping his hands on a scrap of white linen.

"You'll go anywhere!" said Boone.

Father Benedict smiled. "One must save lives before he can save souls. That Indian mother would have died without surgery."

"Is Mary inside?"

"She'll be here in a moment."

Mary heard Boone's voice and came out, carrying the child. She held him so a ray from the teepee struck his shapeless red face. "His mother wanted me to name him, so I called him Boone. You don't mind?"

"I'm—flattered."

Father Benedict laughed and stuffed leaf tobacco into his pipe. "And how will I baptize him without the name of a saint?"

"Then his second name shall be Benedict."

She turned toward the lodge flap, but paused as her ear picked up the sound of feet running through the dark. A French lad came up, panting for breath, "Ma'mselle! Your father! Boone Clifton, he has murder heem."

In surprise she clutched the papoose close against her. It took her a while to realize the full meaning of the words.

"What?"

"Your father—dead. And Boone Clifton, he murder heem."

Boone seized the young *engage* by the collar of his cheap blue overshirt, jerking him around. The lad's face twisted with fear when he saw who was holding him. He pulled from side to side like a rabbit fallen into the claws of a hawk.

"You say *I* killed him?"

"M'shu *Bourgeois!* I did not say thees! M'shu Levet, he's say it. He's say he fin' your tomahawk. I do not know. Everybody they say eet, but I do not know."

Boone released him. He turned to Mary. "Listen..."

She stood, looking at him. It had been too sudden, too much of a blow for her to believe or disbelieve anything. Without answering, she handed the papoose to a squaw and started away at a run, her moccasins making scarcely a sound on the hardened earth.

Boone started to follow her, but Father Benedict stopped him. "Never rush into grief."

"But she believes I killed—"

"She will not believe you guilty if you are not guilty."

"But can't you see? My tomahawk—I left it in the banquet hall where Levet tried to kill me. He has taken it. He must have taken it. It was Levet who murdered MacTavish. I'll have to go up there—"

"And Levet will murder you, or you Levet. Either way she will always believe you guilty. Wait! At least wait long enough to think."

UP AT THE FORT, many lights were burning. The tom-tom still throbbed and men were yipping where the pow-wow fires blazed near the steamboat pier. Near at hand, women were chanting the birth of the warrior.

Boone was too impatient to stay there with Father Benedict. He hurried along the river bank without quite deciding what to do. Out there, in the flat between the gate of the fort and the steamboat landing he imagined many men were moving. He paused to peer through the deep dusk.

Unexpectedly, the tom-toms stopped. Something was wrong. He commenced to run. There was a flash of light from high up on the steamboat, and the next instant the sharp whang of a gun.

Echoes rattled around the rim of cutbanks, and a hundred dogs from the camp of the Assiniboine set up a howling. There was no answering shot for a moment. To Boone's right, back of the dock, he picked up the sound of Levet's voice. His words were not understandable, but he seemed to be commanding a group of men.

The gun ripped out again from high up toward the steamboat's pilot house. This time it drew answer from a cluster of willows near the dock. Once started, these guns kept up a steady fire.

Save for the dull, yellow glow of the furnaces, no lights burned aboard the boat. They had been extinguished. It was merely a great, dark hulk riding in the quiet water, with nothing about it to interest a marksman, but the men in the willows kept up a monotonus fire, shooting as fast as powder and ball could be rammed down the throats of their muskets.

Levet had a plan—and a clever one, Boone was certain of that. There was no time to determine what the plan was. There was only one immediate answer, and that was to cut the steamboat loose and escape. If men were left ashore, they'd have to catch up later. If Mary MacTavish believed him guilty of murder, that would be as it would have to be.

Boone ran down toward the river. It was high, with a current rolling against an undercut bank. Too deep to wade. Willows and rose bramble grew along the edge of the bank. He crept through them, twisting to free his clothing from thorns.

A dozen guns were streaking yellow from different places on the steamboat's decks, but nobody had brains enough to cut her loose.

Down the river he could see a long, dark shape approaching—a canoe, stealing toward the boat with muffled paddles. The

lookouts aboard did not see it—they were all diverted by the shooting.

Boone cupped his hands, "Franchette! Pizon! A boat! Larboard..."

The brush where he stood had seemed deserted, but at the sound of his voice it teemed like a kicked-over anthill. He tried to retreat, but men were crashing through the brush, blocking his way. Men were even splashing water beneath the undercut bank.

Boone dropped to all fours, cursing because he had no weapon. Not even a Barlow knife.

He felt along the earth as he crawled, and his hand closed on a stone. It was stream-washed and rounded, the size of his two fists. He carried it with him as he inched through the tangle.

"I tell-ee he's over thar by the bank," said a trapper. Boone knew the man. His name was Glass. "Close in on him, ye dirty French pork-eaters. And do it sharp, or he'll have your hair for his belt. He's as smart as a trap-footed wolf, that one. Close in, I say, and if he breaks for the open, I'll get my sights on him. I got an eye like a cougar, I have."

Instead of trying to escape downriver, as Glass and his men evidently expected, Boone crept toward the sound of the trapper's voice.

"Qui est—?" he heard someone say right at his elbow.

"Down!" whispered Boone.

The fellow, a cowardly *engage,* obeyed He either did not know who Boone was, or else he was too frightened to fight.

Boone crept on over a sharp drop. Someone moved down there. He caught a glint of gunmetal. Glass's voice rang out. "Who's thar?"

Boone sprang for him, but Glass, an old Indian fighter, was not taken unaware. He reared back, trying to aim his musket. It was one of the English traders' guns with a long, "beaver" barrel, and the length of it saved Boone. He struck the end of it with his forearm and swept it aside as the burning powder scorched his cheek.

Glass seized the heavy barrel in his two hands and swung it like a bludgeon, cursing his men in a hoarse bellow. It was too close for the gun, so he dropped it and came up with a Hudson's Bay tomahawk, its edge kept keen as a knife. He slashed up with it, but Boone shifted his position and swung with the stone. It connected solidly, sending Glass face down into the dirt.

A Frenchman was shouting Glass's name up above. The other *engages* were jabbering excitedly. One of them fired, sending a bullet to fan the air over Boone's head.

BOONE ran toward the dock. By this time, one of the crew had got his wits about him enough to commence ringing the pilot bells. The paddlewheels turned in a faltering manner under a low head of steam, but the boat only tightened her mooring hawsers.

"Cut loose, damn-ee!" Pizon was shouting from somewhere on the hurricane deck.

A sailor ran along the main deck, his dungarees making a dark shadow against the lighter color of the boat. He flung one hawser free, but when he bent over the next a bullet whipped out from behind some pelt bales on the deck and downed him. He cursed and sat up, drawing a pistol.

Boone could no longer see the canoe that had crept up on the backwash current. The men must have boarded the steamboat. He waded to his armpits, and swam the last few yards to reach the edge and pull himself aboard.

"Don't shoot!" he said to a trapper who spun and drew a bead.

Up above, a two-pounder cannon, loaded with shot, was making it hot for the men concealed behind the pelt bales. A sailor managed to hack the second hawser, and the boat swung free, feeling for the current.

"Boarding party on the afterdeck!" Boone shouted.

Half a dozen men heard him and started in that direction. Up above, the pilot was still clanging his bells. He leaned out, defying rifle balls to curse the engineer, but the paddlewheels still had no push in them.

Pizon stopped short after running half the length of the boat and cut loose with a brace of pistols, spraying the engine hatch with buckshot. A fuse was sputtering down there. Dark forms were falling over one another in their attempt to get

back aboard the dugout canoe which was tied to the larboard rail.

Boone ran toward the fuse, but it burned from sight, and the concussion of an explosion knocked him over backward.

He was groggy for a while. He came to and rose to his knees, shaking his head. His first thought was one of thankfulness that the boilers had not been exploded. The low head of steam had saved them.

A swift current had its hands on the boat, dragging it downstream. He could tell by her list that she was taking water rapidly. From time to time her keelpiece rubbed bottom, but always the current caught her up again.

He looked at the damage. The rear of the boat had been ripped, and water rolled in that no pump could handle. The engines were partly under, and those parts which could be seen had been damaged beyond repair by flying timbers.

Fort Yellowstone became a little cluster of lights across and a long way up the river when the *Western Hope* finally came to rest on a sandbar. It was the boat's finish, and Boone Clifton knew it.

He stood on the hurricane deck, his fists knotted. It would have been easy at a time like that to let anger overcome him—to rush back to Fort Yellowstone and battle it out as Levet perhaps hoped he would. But Boone put down his anger. He waited until he could think clearly, then he called his men around him. "There's no time to lose. This is likely to delay us for a month."

Somebody laughed, "You don't think we'll ever float this heap of driftwood again!" Boone did not answer. He merely commenced issuing orders.

"Wappu, get the crew busy with wrecking irons. We can salvage enough timber from the superstructure to make a keelboat. Take it over to that point. Pizon, take one of the skiffs and round up our men over at the fort. Look sharp about it and keep out of trouble. Nixon, you and the black gang set anchors and cut loose what machinery you can. We might get the bottom to ride high enough so we can save it."

"And you?" asked Wappu Franchette, walking close. "You are perhaps going across to look for Shonard Levet? You must not, my *bourgeois*. You will walk into one trap. Believe me, I know that Shonard."

"I am going back," said Boone, "but *not* to look for Shonard Levet." He smiled grimly, rubbing his hand across the place at his belt where his tomahawk had been, "Shonard Levet will have to wait his turn!"

BOONE CLIFTON strapped a pistol to his waist, slid a tomahawk in his scabbard, and paddled one of the skiffs to the opposite shore. It was a couple of miles up to the fort. Excitement seemed to have died down, except among the Assiniboines who were holding a dance.

There was no moon, and Boone was able to walk close to the stockade without being seen. He stood in a deep shadow until the lookout went past on the walk, head and shoulders visible above the barricade of pointed posts. When he was gone, Boone scaled the wall and dropped quietly to the other side.

He passed several *engages* on his way to the great hall, but none of them paid him the least attention. Two sub-clerks were in the main room of the main building, arguing in raised voices. Boone walked around to the little rear door. The stairs were in shadow, and he ascended without being noticed.

A candle was burning in Ron MacTavish's room, and the door was open a few inches. Boone looked inside. Ron's body was laid out on a couch, his fusileer's uniform pulled straight and buttoned, his face seeming big-boned as the candlelight fell on his profile. Watching the body was a young *engage*.

Boone did not know where to find Mary, and there was no one to ask. He moved beyond the light from the door and stood for a while. There was no sound in the building, save for the voices of the clerks downstairs.

After a while he heard the squeak of boards as someone climbed toward the second floor. He stepped into the shadowed cleft of a doorway. The feet finished with the stairs and came along the hall toward him. The light from Ron MacTavish's room fell on a young French lad who was carrying a tray covered by a napkin. The lad rapped at the door.

Mary's voice came. "Yes?"

"Please, Ma'mselle. M'shu Levet he's send dinnaire. You will take it, please?"

"Tell Mr. Levet that I want no dinner."

"But Ma'mselle, he's say I leave it anyway."

"Take it back."

The lad hesitated and then slowly retraced his steps. As soon as his head disappeared down the stairs, Boone walked to the door, lifted the latch, and stepped inside.

Mary MacTavish was sitting in a puncheon chair near a window overlooking the yard. She must have thought the rattle of the latch was caused by the boy, for her face was in her hands, and she did not immediately look up. When she did, Boone was inside, and he had closed the door behind him.

"You!" she cried, springing up.

"Yes. I could not go on letting you think I killed him."

She stood, hands behind her, grasping the chair. Her eyes were flushed from weeping, lit now by anger. She started to speak, but words seemed to choke in her throat.

"Mary, you must believe me. I did not see your father since we left his room this afternoon. I was in the old banquet hall with Shonard Levet. We quarreled there. We fought. I was forced to use my tomahawk. I left it there. I do not say Shonard Levet killed your father. I do not know who killed him. You must believe me, Mary—"

"Lies! I should think you could make up a better story than that. Why should you leave your tomahawk in the banquet hall and—"

"Would I murder your father with my tomahawk and leave it where the crime was committed? Am I that great a fool, Mary?"

"You feared my father!"

"Mary—"

"Yes, you knew he'd learned about the cargo of alcohol you were taking upstream in defiance of every agreement to trade to the Blackfeet. But killing him did not save your secret. Father had already told Shonard. So Shonard went to see for himself, and when he came you opened fire on him from the steamboat."

"Mary, you've been caught in a snare of lies. There was no trade liquor aboard the boat. All we had was a cask of brandy for company use..."

Boone stopped speaking. There was a footstep on the stairs. Not the light step of the French lad. It was the walk of a big man. He came down the hall, paused and rapped at Mary's door. Boone expected it to be Shonard, but it was one of the English clerks from downstairs.

"Mary MacTavish!"

"Yes?"

"Did you call?"

She stood still for a moment, clasping and unclasping the back of the puncheon chair. At last she answered, "No."

The clerk hesitated out there for a few seconds. Boone could hear the planks of the floor squeaking beneath his feet. He left, walking slowly.

"You do not believe I am guilty!" Boone said.

"I *do* believe you are guilty. I believe it, and I hate you!"

Unexpectedly, her legs seemed to collapse, and she fell back into the puncheon chair. She covered her eyes and wept,

"Go away. I don't ever want to see you again..."

Boone stood for a while, looking at her. He knew it was no use. Not now. Perhaps not ever. Without saying more, he let himself from the door and retraced his way down the stairs and out the back entrance.

IV

DURING THE DAYS of early summer a keelboat was rushed to completion within sight of Fort Yellowstone. Levet caused no trouble. During the last days of June the craft was launched, and, with thirty men of the Western Fur pulling the long line from her mast, she started her journey upriver toward Blackfoot country.

"Danse! Mon movin' danse!" sang the Canadian *voyageurs,* heaving on the long line, and, when their rollicking song was completed, a handful of Kentucky rivermen responded with a traditional song of their own,

"Hard upon the ash pole
She moves too slow,
All the way to Shawneetown
Long time ago!"

Whites and Indians gathered in front of Fort Yellowstone to watch them leave, but there were none of the usual salutations, no cannon shooting. Only one hand was lifted in farewell—the hand of Father Benedict.

The Jesuit strode to the water's edge, his long, black robe billowing in the wind that forever blew there at the mouth of the Yellowstone. Voyageurs paused to answer, and when these devout Frenchmen dropped to their knees, he could be seen making priestly gestures of blessing.

That finished, they went on. Day after day. The river fell a little, and it was easier going after the mouth of the Milk was passed. A wind helped them at times, filling a makeshift sail so that poles and lines were unnecessary.

Old Pizon scouted the country on horseback, and each evening he would ride in and say, "They's Injun sign about. A party of Bloods, or I don't know my showin's."

Of the three branches of the Blackfoot nation, the Bloods were most feared.

"They'll be at the Narrows," said Pizon solemnly, looking from one man's scalp to the other, but they passed the Narrows without incident.

Pizon then said, "They'll have us at the White Cliffs," and then, "They'll get us at Kettle Island," but he was wrong in each case. Only stray bands of Gros Ventre and Assiniboine came down the bad lands trails, and they wanted only to trade.

To each party, Boone made presents of tobacco, beads and vermilion, telling them to return to the fort at the mouth of the Marias in thirty suns.

"We'll build her in thirty days," grumbled Pizon to Wappu Franchette, "and them Bloods will burn her down in thirty minutes."

They passed the badlands, and the mouth of the Judith where one fire-blackened wall still stood as a reminder of the ill-fated trading post which had been built by MacKenzie five years before. They passed to the south of the Bear Paw mountains, with an unknown range of purplish hills in the opposite direction; they followed a wide swing of river through a plains country deep in yellow grass, and finally, one afternoon, they camped at the mouth of Marias river, deep in the fur country of the Blackfeet.

It was a clear evening, with light hanging in the horizon long after the sun had set. Up to the north, an Indian smoke signal arose in a long column which ascended to a great height before drifting away. Puffs of smoke answered from the vast plain to the south. Men paused their task of throwing up a temporary barricade to watch, and then they fell to working feverishly.

"They'll be Blackfeet here by mornin'," muttered Pizon, rubbing the forward sight of his percussion rifle, "an', if you want my opinion, they'll be huntin' nothin' but trouble."

No Indians came next morning, or the next, but scouts located two war parties skulking in the district. Ten days and the stockades were built, trade goods were moved inside, and two-pounder cannon, filled with grape, were mounted at each corner. Then the sill logs of the trading house were laid.

Assiniboines came, their faces streaked with vermilion and chokecherry purple, heavily armed and expecting trouble from their traditional enemies, the Piegan tribe of the Blackfeet nation. The Assiniboines were fierce, and often as not inhospitable to the whites, but on this occasion the fort gave them a measure of safety. They erected their teepees as close to it as Boone Clifton would allow.

Trade was brisk for northern furs of beaver, wolf and otter. A band of Crees came on their little ponies and pitched camp between the Assiniboines and the bend of the river. And finally, one morning near the first of August, a group of fifty horsemen appeared near the summit of the bluffs and followed a zig-zag trail to the bottom. The decorations on their lances, and something about their haughty bearing, stamped them as Blackfeet.

THEY HAD NOT COME to trade, these Blackfeet, for they rode their cayuses light, and there were no squaws and travois following them.

They reached the bottoms and came toward the gate of the stockade, forming a line, single file. The stockade gate was barred, and Boone Clifton walked out alone to pow-wow with the war party.

Their chief, a tall, hawk-faced young man with extremely prominent nose and

cheek-bones, rode forward by himself, twisting his rawhide hackamore so his slim-legged pinto danced in graceful half-turns. He paused a short distance from Boone and lifted his fingers in a sign of peace.

"Me, chief Ak-ak-otis — Many Horse. Me, friend of white man."

He pointed to a large, silver medal held on his bare chest by a thong.

The medal was of the type commonly presented by army commanders in the name of the "white father in Washington." Boone supposed that Many Horse had killed some Sioux or Assiniboine for it.

"You a Blood?" asked Boone.

Many Horse signed "yes."

"Why do you come with war party?"

"We come to trade."

"Blood who comes to trade brings squaws and papoose, not lance and shield."

Many Horse looked more hawklike than ever. "We have squaw and papoose back in coulee."

"Where is chief Eagle Rib?"

"Eagle Rib gone. Eagle Rib bad man. Eagle Rib kill many white man. Me, white man friend." He pointed toward the gate. "Now we go in and trade."

"You have nothing to trade."

"Give us strongwater. Then we will bring many buffalo skin."

"You'll get no strongwater at Fort Marias."

Many Horse twisted around in the high-fronted, wooden tree he used as a saddle, pretending to have trouble in handling his horse. He held his rifle high, balancing it so the pan would not tilt. By that Boone knew it was primed, so he was ready for trouble.

THE pinto reared. Many Horse twisted the hackamore to bring him around. In doing this, as though by accident, he tilted the barrel of his flintlock down. He cried something and pulled the trigger.

But Boone was not taken by surprise. He bent double and felt the fan of the musket ball over his back. He whirled and drew his tomahawk as Many Horse dropped the musket and brought his lance around. The lance was long, so Many Horse had to move back to bring it into play. He twisted his pinto, but there was no time. Boone had seized the rawhide thongs of the hackamore. He moved inside the point of the lance and dragged the Indian to earth by the silver medal at his chest.

Many Horse had no weapon left except a broad-bladed dagger. He tried to draw this, and Boone booted it away. He tried to rise, and Boone drove him sprawling, with his feathers digging the dust.

He leaped over Many Horse, seized his buffalo-skin breechclout from his waist, and beat him over the head with it—the greatest insult that could be paid a warrior of the Bloods.

Many Horse hid his face and staggered up. He slunk away in disgrace, as the warriors moved uneasily, muttering among themselves.

Boone laughed in a great voice and pointed toward him, "See now the squaw you call chief!"

One of the Indians, a heavy man of forty or so, was gesturing violently and pointing toward Many Horse. By his eagle feathers, Boone knew this man had taken many scalps and horses.

"You! I would talk with you."

Flattered, the broad-shouldered man rode forward.

"You are a chief?" asked Boone.

"Me—Sakoye-Otan. Heavy Shield."

"Tell your warriors to come through the gate four at a time and we will make them presents."

The warriors came and received gifts of bright-colored beads, and tobacco, and scraps of red flannel to decorate their lances. When they rode away, Many Horse, disgraced, was not in the lead.

The following morning a warrior came down from the little, yellow hills and rode all alone to the gate of the stockade. He carried a piece of white antelope skin on which was painted a message in sign language. Wappu Franchette deciphered it.

"It is from Eagle Rib," he said. "He wants you to make him a present."

"Answer, saying if he wants a present he must come here after it."

The messenger shook his head so violently he lost one of the feather ornaments from his scalplock.

"Eagle Rib great chief!" cried the warrior lifting one forefinger, speaking the Blackfoot tongue. "Eagle Rib wants to be friend with the white men. Eagle Rib

would let white men trade. But white men must make him a present. Must send ten guns, ten horses, and five kegs strongwater. This Eagle Rib must have from white man."

"And what if he doesn't get it?"

"Then the fort will be burned, and white man's hair will be raised on fifty lances."

Boone Clifton laughed and lifted his own forefinger, "Listen to me! Even if Eagle Rib's lodges were many as the burrows of the prairie dog town we would not fear him. Tell Eagle Rib if he comes to trade we will make him a gift of beads, red blankets, and fine clothes. If he comes to fight, he will get many pieces of death from the strong guns. Now I, Boone Clifton, have spoken."

The warrior received the words with a face high-boned and expressionless. He twisted his pony around, kicking it with his moccasined heels, making a gesture of defiance at the bearded men who watched over the pickets of the stockade. He spat in the direction of the Assiniboine lodges, and rode away up the hill trail as fast as his pony could dig dirt.

EXTRA POWDER and lead were passed out, and lookouts were posted on the nearby bluffs, but the Bloods did not return. Old Pizon and a couple of company trappers, scouting the vicinity of the Little Sandy beneath wolf skins, came back with the word that Eagle Rib's band was breaking camp. Next day the Bloods rode away toward the east.

"Oh-ho, thees *bourgeois* he's great man. He's scare them out!" said Wappu Franchette.

But Pizon muttered, "Nobody livin' nor dead scared Eagle Rib. He'll be back to taste the lead of these two-pounders of ours before the autumn trade is through."

A freehunter named Mark Leeds came down the river in a dugout canoe three weeks later. "You *bourgeois* here?" he asked of Boone.

"Yes."

"Then you'd better get your guns primed. Shonard Levet has just set up a tradin' post yonder at the mouth of the Judith, and he's makin' himself plenty popular with the Bloods and assorted Blackfeet."

"What's he trading them?"

"Powder and ball. Muskets to shoot it in. Strongwater to make 'em brave."

Boone wasn't surprised. He had expected something like this from Levet.

"The gal's there, too," went on Leeds.

Boone's face tightened, "What girl?"

"Mary MacTavish, an' who else? I hear the Levet, Boushon outfit has abandoned the fort at the Yellerstone."

"There's some mistake. She wouldn't—"

"I seen her with my own eyes, *bourgeois!*"

"Very well, you saw her!"

"Yep, I saw plenty of things down at the Judith, and I'm tradin' my plews. I hear from a Gros Ventre that Shonard Levet's put a price on white man's hair. I hear he's offered a gill of strongwater for every Western Fur company scalp that's brought him from up the river. I ain't seen the lights of St. Looie for six year, but I aim to next winter. They're a heap bettern' lookin' than upcountry grass roots."

"We'll be here next summer to trade with you, if that St. Louis whisky hasn't killed you by that time," Boone told him.

With the closing days of summer the Bloods returned. For miles their lodges filled the flat bottom of the Little Sandy, and each night the sound of war drums came over the intervening miles.

One evening, before time for the war drums to begin, Boone Clifton mounted his pony and struck out across the flat lands to the north of the stockade. Pizon and Franchette wanted to go along, but he motioned them back and rode on alone.

The trail crossed Marias river near its confluence with the Teton, and climbed zig-zag up the flanks of bluffs to the prairie bench beyond. He knew he was being watched, but he did not look around. He merely continued, holding his horse to an even pace, heading by the shortest line to the mouth of Little Sandy.

He paused for a moment to look at the great encampment below. Teepees were spread from the river to the bend in the coulee more than a mile above. Shadows of evening were settling, and the air was bluish from smoke of the lodgefires.

Down near the river was a huge teepee of a type used by the greatest of chiefs. Twenty buffalo skins must have gone into its making, and its outside was covered

with paintings illustrating its owner's triumphs in battle.

Boone knew this must be the lodge of Eagle Rib, so he headed towards it, ignoring the trail to descend the steep coulee side.

Indians shouted and rode their ponies from both directions when they saw him. One tall warrior with jingle bells fastened to his bridle drew down on him with an arrow, but Boone did not even glance his way in riding past.

He drew up at the lodge door and for the first time he spoke. "I would see Eagle Rib," he said in the Blackfoot tongue to a warrior.

Eagle Rib came from his lodge. Boone had never seen him before, but there was an air about him which left no doubt of his identity.

Eagle Rib was not an extremely large man. He was perhaps six feet and rather slim. He was not painted, save for a streak of vermilion around his jaw bone and on the tip of his nose. His face was not flat, as are the faces of many Blackfeet. His nose was high bridged, his cheeks rather thin and his eyes had the smoldering quality of a waiting hawk.

He looked at Boone for a moment, arms folded beneath the light robe of spotted buffalo calf which was draped over his shoulders. Then, with a quick movement, he drew a tomahawk and flipped it, end over end, so that its keen edge bit into the wood of a box elder log nearby.

Boone drew his own tomahawk, the only weapon he had brought, and with a seemingly careless motion, sank it in the same log not more than two inches from Eagle Rib's.

He dismounted, letting his bridle reins drag. Neither man spoke. Eagle Rib lifted the teepee flap, and Boone bent double to walk inside.

It was dark in the big teepee with only a few coals glowing in the fire at its middle. Eagle Rib gathered some twigs of sagebrush and tossed them so the fire blazed up. He took a stone calumet from the honor spot, stuffed it with rubbed tobacco and willow bark, lighted it, and handed it to his guest.

"You are a brave man," said Eagle Rib.

"Because I come alone to your lodge?"

"Yes."

"I knew no guest would be robbed of his life or his horse while he was guest at the lodge of Eagle Rib."

Eagle Rib stared into the fire with his expressionless face. "Why have you come?"

"To ask why you would make war on the fur company."

"This is the land of my people, and so it has been since the first sun rose from the plains and set across the great mountains."

"And it will remain your country. That is the wish of the fur company."

Eagle Rib unexpectedly stood and slapped his palms together. A boy who had been standing in the deep shadows at the back of the teepee ran outside, and in five minutes a dozen Indians had come, one by one, to squat in a circle around the fire.

THEY WAITED, silent, staring at the sagebrush fire. At last another entered, a young warrior with shifty eyes. Boone stiffened a little when he saw him. It was Weasel Head.

Boone had supposed him dead of the tomahawk blow back in Fort Yellowstone. He paused a second, his smoldering, crafty eyes on Boone, but he made no sign of recognition. He merely came and squatted in the circle with the others.

The only other one of the group Boone had seen before was Heavy Shield, the big shouldered man who had ridden to Fort Marias with the disgraced Many Horse a month before.

The calumet went the rounds, each man taking three puffs, blowing at the sky, the earth, and straight in front.

"The white chief has come to see us on a mission of peace," said Eagle Rib. "He would ask us to save his fort of pointed sticks."

Boone gestured in the negative, "I would ask you to save the women of your lodges from weeping for the men who would lie dead if you should ride against us."

"You have come unbidden into the land of the Blackfeet!" rumbled a chief named Matose-Apiwa—Old Sun.

"I came to give you kettles for your camp, beads for your clothes, and ver-

milion for your faces. I would give you fair trade for your furs, and each year a new supply of the wonders of the white man from St. Louis."

"You would give us strongwater as gifts?" asked Weasel Head, his eyes bead-like as a snake's.

"The only reason white men give you strongwater is so they can cheat you. You will get no strongwater."

Another asked, "You will give us guns that shoot with little beads called 'caps' such as you gave our enemies, the Assiniboines?"

"I have given no guns to the Assiniboines, but of lead and powder I will give each man one pound to kill meat for his camp."

"No! No!" went the cry from lip to lip. Even Heavy Shield who Boone accounted as a friend showed disapproval.

Chief Crazy Bull arose. He was a great chested man, but so striped from waist to scalplock with yellow clay that he resembled a skeleton by the uncertain flame of the fire.

"Hear me, O white chief! Your brother white man, the great chief of Fort Judith, told us you had put new shoot-guns into the hands of the Assiniboines to kill us. He said you will give those Assiniboines strongwater one night when their lodges have come to your fort as many as the leaves of the chokecherry tree, and they will come down on us and kill our men, our squaws and our papooses. Hear me! —you must go, and you must take the Assiniboines, those eaters of roast snakes with you. If you do not, then our brothers, the Piegans, will join us and we will have the hair of all of you."

He sat down, and a murmur of agreement ran through the circle. Boone tried new arguments, but they were futile.

All this time, while other chiefs and old men made great talk, Weasel Head said nothing. He sat back in the shadow of two larger men so that only the glitter of his crafty, black eyes was visible. Suddenly, when he thought the temper of the chiefs had reached its pitch, he sprang toward Boone, a knife flashing in his hand, uttering a Blackfoot battlecry.

He swung the knife swift as a striking snake, but quick as he was, Boone Clifton was ready.

He rocked over backward, catching the thrust with his forearm. He seized Weasel Head by the wrist and hip, lifted him so that only one toe touched the ground, and dumped him across the fire.

Weasel Head screamed and tried to lunge forward with his dagger again, but Eagle Rib sprang out and smashed him so that he fell into a heap of buffalo robes at the back of the teepee.

Eagle Rib towered and said, "The white man has come as a guest to the lodge of Eagle Rib. He shall smoke the calumet, and he shall leave with his scalp, and his horse!"

It was Eagle Rib himself who called for Boone's horse to be caught and led to him. No other words were spoken, and Boone rode away up the darkening coulee side.

V

BACK IN THE LODGE of Eagle Rib the fire burned low as the pipe went around, and the Bloods considered the issue of war or peace.

"These white men of Western Fur must be killed," said Weasel Head, speaking in close-clipped words, gesturing sharply with his head. "Is it not true they will give guns to the Assiniboines to kill us?"

Chief Wolf Rattle pointed to a scar on his forearm and another on his side. "This scar was made by the arrow of an Assiniboine, and this by the bullet of a white man. Do not these two scars prove they are in league against us?"

"Ai! Ai!" went ejaculations of assent around the council fire.

Chief Heavy Shield rose and spoke, "Behold, my years are many as the thorns of the cactus plant. I have seen many braves go forth to battle, but always the white man has gun which shoots far, and he has a wall to stop our arrows. We must be many and win in the first charge, or else our women will wail many nights for the warriors who will not come home. We must not attack tomorrow. We must wait for our brothers, the Piegans. With their warriors added to ours, we will tear down the walls before the white men have time to reload."

Weasel Head leaped up, gesticulating fiercely, saying that Chief Wolf Collar,

who led the Piegans, was an old squaw who loved the ways of peace.

"Let us attack tonight before they can make ready for us!" he cried, but the caution of Heavy Shield finally prevailed.

On the following day, Wolf Collar came with three hundred lodges of Piegans. Again the council fire burned, but, as Weasel Head had suggested, Wolf Collar proved to be hesitant.

He was an ancient man with a face withered like a dry turnip, but when he spoke he carried himself as befitted a warrior who had taken scalps to the numbers of the fingers of both his hands.

"You say the white man sells arms to the Assiniboine, our enemy?" he asked, speaking in a voice dry as a magpie's. "But who has told you this? You have been told by the white man at Fort Judith. Now this white man at Fort Judith you say is a friend. You say he is so because he traded you strongwater for your furs. But listen to my wisdom. Perhaps he did this only to rob you. Perhaps he has lied about the other white man. Let us ride down to this fort and see if it is true. Then if it is, let us destroy them."

Wolf Collar's son, Hind Shot, rose after him and spoke to the same tune, and after much bickering, the Bloods agreed.

Next morning they rode forth, painted, stripped for battle, and ranged themselves in a semicircle around the fort while the outnumbered Assiniboines crowded for protection inside the stockade.

A few hotheads among the Bloods fired their muskets, but the range was extreme, and their bullets kicked up puffs of dust far short of the stockade. Inside the enclosure the whites held their fire.

After a few minutes a man from the ranks of the Piegans rode forward. It was Wolf Collar. His body was streaked with vermilion and yellow clay, a single eagle feather was stuck upright in his hair to signify his triumphs in battle.

He rode slowly, one hand raised in a signal of peace, the other carrying his buffalo shield and long British rifle. He paused midway between the ranks of the Blackfeet and the fort. In a little while the stockade gate opened and Boone Clifton came out.

The two men met, and the chief began signaling rapidly in sign language. He paused, waiting for Boone to answer. It was very quiet, as though both sides were listening to see what that answer would be.

A gunshot broke the silence, rattling in echoes from the river bluffs. Next second, Wolf Collar's buckskin horse reared. Wolf Collar was bent far over the animal's neck, clutching the mane. Then he fell to the earth, arms outstretched. He lay there without moving.

Boone did not know where the shot had come from. It seemed to have come from the hills rather than from ranks of the Indians, or from the fort. He started over to see if Wolf Collar still lived, but a cry had surged up from the ranks of the Blackfeet.

He ran for the stockade as bullets cuffed dirt around his feet. The gate was flung open, and he made it inside.

The Blackfeet, in two great waves, were swinging up from the flat down the river.

Their bullets and arrows thudded into the pickets of the stockade and tore chunks of mud chinking from between the logs of the blockhouses, but it was wild, ineffectual shooting from the backs of running horses.

Some of the terrified *engages* who had never seen battle before commenced firing back.

"Hold your fire," roared Boone. He looked around the enclosure to make sure that everyone was in position. Three of the cannon were wheeled around, and men waited with smoking faggots in their hands. The hunters and most of the *engages* were crouched by loopholes in the stockade, The Assiniboines, however, had just made the shelter of the stockade and were in a turmoil.

"Warriors!" he cried in the Assiniboine tongue. "Get on the wall and take your places. These are your enemies, the Blackfeet."

They scrambled to places along the walk as old Pizon did a polka step high up in the blockhouse. "Yipee!" he shouted. "Thar's plenty of Blackfoot hair to go around today!"

BOONE expected the first wave to swing aside and circle to the rear, but he was wrong. These leaders were Bloods, the wildest of Eagle Rib's warriors, and they rode straight on.

When he could see the foam dropping from their ponies' mouths, Boone gave the signal.

Three cannon roared almost in unison, hurling grape and buckshot. The slugs fanned out, tearing ragged holes through the ranks of charging Indians. For a moment the scene was seething with dust and disorder. Horses plunged away, dragging bridles; men rolled on the earth.

Eagle Rib himself was visible for a moment, waving his rifle overhead, screaming orders to his men.

High on the blockhouse, old Pizon spat at the front sight of his Kentucky rifle and pulled down. He had Eagle Rib in the V, but his pony spun and the bullet missed. Pizon cursed his luck and poured another charge down the barrel.

The cannon were rolled back, another load was rammed home, and they thundered again into the midst of the turmoil.

The charge had been concerted, but the cannon had broken it. Four more or less distinct groups of riders now were making the ride where first there had been a solid wall. Some of these, seeing their comrades fall, held back on their bridles.

One riderless horse, racing ahead of the charge, continued blindly straight toward the gate of the stockade. He seemed ready to plunge into it, but he stopped, going to one side, and ran back with rawhide stirrups whopping to disappear in the dust and turmoil.

The fire from the fort became scattering, as men frantically reloaded. Had the Bloods been led boldly at the moment they might have gone on to take the stockade, but Eagle Rib's horse had stumbled and it was a few seconds before he could catch up with his men.

By then part of the warriors had swerved toward the river, the rest were turning sharply in their tracks.

Eagle Rib shouted so that his voice could be heard above everything. He was all alone for a moment, not one hundred paces from the gate, gesturing with his rifle. Bullets drummed around him, but none of them took hold.

Unable to rally this first rush, he turned back to meet the advancing surge of Piegans. His voice was a scream so that it could be heard at the fort.

"Piegans! It is your old chief the white men slew. Tear their wall down! Take them alive so your squaws can beat them to death with sticks..." His words were drowned in the mounting cries of the Piegans.

The Piegans were coming now in a solid wave. They swept around the faltering Bloods. In a moment the Bloods turned with them, and quirted their mounts once more towards the stockade. The charge was on again, more overwhelming than ever.

IT WAS a brave and colorful show, had anyone the inclination to appreciate it. A thousand Indians, the pick of the fierces tribes of the Northwest, all riding at top speed, their bodies, and the bodies of their horses streaked with the colors of the sunset, their lances and guns and bows aflutter with feathers and bits of cloth.

The cannon shook the earth with their discharge, but this time there were more warriors, and the holes they opened were quickly closed. The charge came on like a wave sweeping a river bar. Down in the foreground some of the Bloods unhorsed by the first charge had opened fire with their new percussion rifles.

One of the *engages* crumpled without making a sound and fell from the catwalk along the stockade. A company trapper who had exposed himself too bravely plunged down the ladder to a blockhouse with his side ripped by a rifleball.

The third round of cannon shots came when the charge was a scant forty paces away. Dust rolled from plunging horses and falling riders, but the charge came without slowing, straight against the pickets of the stockade.

The wall weaved as horses were crowded into it, but it was well braced by cottonwood logs on the inside. For a moment it seemed that the entire length of it would hold, but a stampeding horse, squealing with fright after its rider had been shot from its back, plunged with front feet high into the section just to the left of the big gate.

The section was torn from the earth and tilted, coming to rest against a prop at a forty-five degree angle. A Piegan with his face painted orange tried to ride his horse on over it, but a bullet smashed him backward.

The horse, halfway through, struggled, wild eyed, trying to extract its forelegs from between the pointed pickets. A couple of Bloods quit their horses to leap into the opening.

An Assiniboine came up, crouching, an arrow grooved into the thong of his chokecherry bow. The bow bent, and he drove the arrow so that it pierced the leading Blood's neck, its trade barb going on to protrude a foot beyond his back.

It was a death blow, but such was his will that he came on anyway, swinging his tomahawk and splitting the Assiniboine's skull. The other Blood, a step behind, made it inside the enclosure, but Boone leaped forward and smashed him down with a chunk of splintered picket.

Eagle Rib could be heard from the midst of the turmoil screaming orders. He was ordering his men to charge the opening.

It took a moment for the Blackfeet to swing their horses around. They charged, but the cannon from the far corner of the stockade, loaded with grape, had been brought around and aimed.

Two hunters lay on their backs, propping the gun with their feet. Another hunter swung it level, a fourth man touched the match. The cannon leaped and roared from a weight of powder which threatened to split it. The stockade posts were peeled of bark by the fury of the grape, and the half-dozen Blackfeet trying to enter were smashed back.

"Keep to your posts!" bellowed Boone Clifton at the *engages* who were abandoning the wall.

Indians were clambering the pointed stockade posts now. Assiniboines, swinging their lances, were of more value than the *engages* who were seeing their first battle.

Old Pizon leaped to the ground, bellowing for one of the cannon to be carried up the ladder to his blockhouse. When no one listened to him he grabbed the nearest one and tried to struggle up the ladder with it alone. Finally an *engage* helped him. Pizon wheeled the piece around and aimed it through a loophole.

A Piegan spied its muzzle and shouted a warning. Fearing the point-blank threat of the cannon, many of the Indians broke away from the wall. The cannon thundered, its shot digging earth along the stockade and not hitting a man. Old Pizon cursed his luck, blaming others for poor aim, but the shot was successful anyway. Time was gained while those protecting the wall could reload.

Eagle Rib tried to rally his men. A volley of musketry from the stockade sent them reeling back. They carried on a desultory fire as they retreated.

Seizing the opportunity, half a dozen Assiniboines slid through the break in the stockade to scalp Blackfeet who had fallen outside. Pizon came down the ladder and looked gloomily after the retreating Blackfeet. "They'll be back," he said, "come nightfall."

BOONE nodded. They would be back, all right, and back for vengeance with every trick that lay in the crafty brain of Eagle Rib.

The Indians paused beyond rifle range and milled around on their horses. Eagle Rib dismounted and called a council. The chiefs gathered and argued for an hour, then the forces withdrew still farther, breaking up into groups to surround the fort. In the afternoon they gathered wood and sagebrush stalks for fires.

A war dance started in the evening, and continued until long after dark. At last the fires faded to heaps of red coals, and the war drums became silent.

Watch was redoubled around the stockade, but an hour passed without the expected attack.

"Maybe thees Eagle Rib he will starve us out," said Wappu Franchette.

Boone shook his head. "He doesn't dare go back to the squaws with empty saddles and no scalps to show. He'll attack tonight—or tomorrow night at the latest."

The moon came up over the low peaks of the distant mountains and for a while every feature of the surrounding river valley could be seen; then a thick layer of clouds settled in, making the night blacker than ever.

Men along the stockade talked in whispers, and stared until their eyes flickered with the darkness. A scout crept in, muttering his name as a password. He left an "all's well" message, and went out again.

Down by the river a series of bullet

streaks stabbed the night, and the silence was disturbed by a fury of gunfire.

"*Sauvage!*" screamed one of the *engages*, thinking it was the attack.

"Quiet!" barked Boone Clifton.

The bullets were not aimed at the fort. The range was too extreme. "Them Injuns must be trigger touchy," muttered Pizon.

"They're shooting at something down along the river."

A French lad clambered down one of the ladders from the blockhouse. "M'shu Clifton! I see heem! One boat, I think, on river. It was at this they shoot. See, it go ashore over near the cove."

Pizon grunted in derision, but Boone climbed the ladder to see. The river was visible as a lighter streak through the darkness, but its surface seemed to be empty of movement. Boone decided the lad had been seeing thing and started back down the ladder. He paused. He heard a cry from the direction of the cove. Imagination or otherwise, it had seemed like Mary calling his name.

He cupped his hands and shouted back. An answer came, clearly this time—the voice of Mary MacTavish.

Boone leaped to the ground and strode to the gate, discarding his rifle for a double-barrelled percussion pistol.

"If any of you have the stomachs for it, you can come along with me. There are white people over there, and I'm going to bring them inside the stockade."

"It's a Blackfoot trick," said Pizon. "Either them, or that damned Shonard Levet."

"I heard Mary MacTavish's voice."

"Well, I'm with you," grunted Pizon, feeling of the handle of his Green River knife. "This place is gettin' tiresome anyhow."

Four other hunters volunteered. With Boone in the lead they crept outside the gate and across the flat ground toward the river. Delger, one of the scouts, challenged them from his place of concealment in a depression a hundred paces from the fort.

"Did ye hear a female's voice out yonder?" he asked.

"Either that, or a Blackfeet imitation," muttered Pizon.

Delger joined them, and they went on. Indians were shouting and pounding through the brush down by the cove. By the clop-clop of horse's hoofs Boone guessed that more Indians were coming.

"That must be some of the Piegans from down the river," he said. "I have an idea there are all in the brush I'd care to handle. Delger, you and the rest stay here and pin those Piegans down. Pizon, you'd better come with me."

Delger and his men cut loose in the direction of the Piegans about the time Boone and Pizon reached the deep brush that grew around the cove. It was blind shooting, but close enough to make the Piegans think they had walked into an ambush. They fired back and retreated along the riverbank.

The shooting caused confusion in the brush so that Boone and Pizon came into it undetected. A warrior loomed in front of them. He sucked in his breath to shout, but Boone leaped upon him, catching his throat in a stranglehold made by the bend of his arm.

THE warrior was big, but he could not break the hold. He struggled for more than a minute, then the tension left his muscles, and Boone let him drop. Pizon grunted, and the two went on.

Boone waited until Delger and his hunters cut loose with a second round of shots, then he called.

"Mary!"

He listened, and called her name more loudly. He was about to try again when a twig snapped in the nearby bramble, and a dark form crept out.

"Mary?"

"It is I—Father Benedict," said a quiet voice.

"Father—"

"Mary is here."

Mary appeared from the shadow. She came forward, almost weeping from relief at sight of Boone. Two trappers from Fort Yellowstone were also there.

"Boone," she said. "We had to—"

"No time for talking. We'll have to make it in a hurry or the brush will be swarming with Blackfeet. Take the shortcut right toward those gun flashes."

Good fortune and the confusion were in their favor. They made the stockade without drawing a shot.

"I'm sorry I couldn't get here in time to warn you of this," Mary said as soon

as the stockade gate closed behind them.

"Then you were at the new fort on the Judith?"

"Yes."

Boone's jaw went hard, and his voice had a tight sound, "With Shonard Levet?"

"Boone—it's not what you think. I never cared for Shonard Levet. He abandoned Fort Yellowstone, and I had to go with him. When I saw what he was about, selling liquor and guns to those Blackfeet, I wanted to warn you, but he suspected and locked me up. I escaped with Father Benedict and those two hunters. He followed with his renegades, but he couldn't catch us."

"You mean Levet was following you tonight?"

"He's probably in the Blackfoot camp right now!"

VI

SHONARD LEVET had distributed three hundred percussion rifles and as many quarts of alcohol among the Blackfeet, and in so doing he had served his cause in two ways—he had realized as nice a fortune in furs as he had ever taken in a single season's trade, and he had assured the removal of his principal enemies—Boone Clifton and the Western Fur.

Yes, Levet had every reason to feel well satisfied with himself.

He was sorry for the way things had fared between himself and Mary MacTavish, however. In some way, she had come to learn the truth about her father's murder. Father Benedict, that Jesuit meddler, was no doubt responsible for that. And she had become infuriated at the nature of his trade with the Bloods. He had grown suspicious that she might try to warn Boone Clifton of impending trouble and had confined her in a storeroom of the trade house.

Although everything had worked out perfectly, Levet doubted the reliability of his new allies—the Bloods. It would be like them to go out and shoot buffalo for winter food, or for the Piegans, their cousins, to talk them into declaring war on the Assiniboines. As a result, he decided to go upriver and keep an eye on them.

He loaded a *bateau* with a small falconet and cannonball to fit it, put in some alcohol and chose eleven of his most trusted renegades to start in the morning.

Levet still hoped to patch things up with Mary, so he had not ventured to expose himself to her wrath since his men had locked her in the room at the trading house. Before leaving, however, he decided to stop in and have a few words with her.

He lifted the bar, but her room was empty. Someone had removed a log at the back. He raged through the fort and discovered that Father Benedict and two of the hunters were gone, too. Some Gros Ventres, camped up the river, said they had gone by in a dugout canot an hour before.

Levet cursed his luck and ordered the French guard hung by his thumbs from the gate crossbar, and lashed with a hardened rawhide thong, to be left bleeding and half-dead as an example to others who might neglect their duty. He then gathered his renegades and started upriver.

During the next forty-eight hours, Levet gave a good deal of thought to the torture to which Father Benedict and the two hunters would be treated, but as it happened, his *bateau* was heavily loaded, and though twice they caught sight of the dugout, they were never able to overtake it.

Approaching the mouth of the Marias he heard the sound of war drums and was elated that the attack was apparently in the offing.

They pulled ashore, and the renegades tossed up a rude barricade of tree roots and driftwood near the water's edge. Levet left them and walked alone toward the camp of the Bloods.

Few white men would have dared such an act while the Indians had war paint on, but Levet was not a coward. By chance he found Weasel Head, his old henchman, and Weasel Head took him on to the fire where Eagle Rib sat.

"How!" spoke Levet, lifting his palm.

Eagle Rib acknowledged the greeting, but he did not rise. He sat cross-legged on the earth, his eyes like the brands of the sagebrush fire in front of him.

"You told us the fort of the white man was weak and would fall at one push. You said we would wet our knives in their

blood before the sun moved two fingers. You said this, but behold!—it has not been true. Tomorrow many teepees of the Blackfeet will be filled with wailing women. I sit here, looking at the fire, and letting its yellow tongues speak to me. They tell me I have been tricked by the white man who now comes to talk."

Levet spread his massive shoulders and struck his chest with his fist, "Are you a weakling, Eagle Rib? Were you nourished on rabbit's milk as the Assiniboines say? Is it true you will slink away at sight of first blood?"

Eagle Rib's face was inscrutable. The hollows of his cheeks looked like holes in a skull by the shifting firelight. He waited as Levet went on speaking.

"I am your friend! Although I am a white man, I hate other white men. I would have you kill them all. For that reason I have brought you a shoot-far gun—a cannon. I have brought powder, and ball for its barrel. And I have brought strongwater to make your warriors brave."

"My warriors need no strongwater to make them brave. You should give it to those coward Piegans that are led by Hind Shot."

"Piegans?"

"Yes."

"What is the matter with Wolf Collar that Hind Shot leads them?"

"He was shot..." The eyes of Eagle Rib knifed around to make certain that none but Levet and Weasel Head were inside hearing distance. "Wolf Collar was shot by Weasel Head, but in a manner which made it seem the whites did it. It was the only way to make those Piegans fight. And they believed he was killed by the white men—all except for that Hind Shot."

"Then Hind Shot knows?"

"He does not know. But he suspects. He says, 'How could my brave father, Wolf Collar, be killed from the fort while the white man stood in the way?' "

"He is too wise," muttered Levet. "He is too wise! Do you understand me, Eagle Rib?"

Eagle Rib spoke to Weasel Head, "You will go. And when you return, you will show me the hair of that Hind Shot."

"I understand."

"Wait!" Levet handed Weasel Head a long-bladed Kentucky knife. "Use this, and when it is done leave the blade in the wound so the Piegans will think a white man did it."

After Weasel Head was gone, Levet said, "You must not wait until morning so your warriors will see the bodies of their dead brothers to give them fear. You must win the fort tonight."

"Perhaps the Piegans will not follow us. Let us wait until we hear of Hind Shot's death."

"No. Listen to me! I have brought the gun that shoots far, and with it some iron balls to heat white hot in the fire. With these I will show you some strong medicine."

THE FIRE was built up, and iron cannonballs were rolled down the barrel of the little cannon so when they struck the powder they were hurled in great arcs through the air.

The first of them fell short and bounded in a flaming streak along the ground to collide with the stockade. A few seconds later the stockade posts began to flame, but the white men shoveled dirt and put it out.

The next ball crashed through the roof of a blockhouse. Another tore through the roof of the great hall. A third started flames in a far corner of the stockade.

Already the Bloods were riding in a circle just beyond the light of the flames, firing into the fort. Levet and Eagle Rib watched triumphantly from their place near the fire.

"Did I not tell you I had brought strong medicine?" asked Levet.

"You are a great chief," answered Eagle Rib.

"But where are the Piegans? If those cowards would add their numbers—"

"Here is the chief of the Piegans!"

The two men spun around at sound of the voice so close behind them, and there stood Hind Shot, his face daubed with white clay in mourning for his father, the skin of a cow buffalo drawn around his shoulders, a long-handled knife glimmering where his hand appeared in the fold.

He came forward with a little, twisting movement letting the skin cloak fall from his shoulders. His other hand had been

concealed, but now he held it high, showing a scalp still pink from the taking.

He spoke, "It is not well to send a weasel into the nest of a falcon, Eagle Rib!"

"I do not know what you are speaking of," cried Eagle Rib, starting back, reaching for his tomahawk.

Hind Shot screamed the Piegan battle cry and sprang with knife upraised. The two men locked for a moment, their weapons flashing in the firelight.

They writhed for the advantage—writhed so fast that Levet was not able to come to Eagle Rib's assistance.

Hind Shot bent double and let the knife slip from one hand, catching it in the other. It was a movement as swift as light, and it fooled the wily chief of the Bloods. The knife blade flashed up, and Eagle Rib stiffened, his hawklike face thrown back toward the sky.

He fell with a rattle in his throat, and with a swift sweep of his knife, Hind Shot removed his scalp.

He spun on Levet then, but Levet was gone, shouting to the Bloods, "Behold! The white men of the fort have sent the traitor Hind Shot to murder your chief!"

Levet had intended to build up the fury of the Bloods so he could send them on an orgy of slaughter through the burning fort, but instead their war whoops were raised against their cousins, the Piegans.

They rushed down on Hind Shot who still held the knife and scalp. A Blood warrior tried to trample over him with his galloping horse, but Hind Shot was too quick. He spun to the right and caught the horse's mane. Hind Shot's knife flashed upward, and the rider drew one quick breath as its point reached his heart.

The horse reared and struck earth running. Hind Shot did not mount. He hung to the horse's side, keeping the animal between himself and the charging Bloods until he was out of range in the darkness.

Some of the Bloods, perhaps a hundred of them, kept up their fire at the blazing fort, while the others swung to meet the attack of the Piegans. The battle was a mad, see-saw affair with few knowing who or where their enemies were.

Levet cursed them all, grabbed the bridle of a runaway horse, and rode toward the camp of his renegades.

Nine of the men were crouched inside their rude breastworks, rifles primed and ready. The other two had fled.

"Come along," said Levet. "Mary MacTavish is at the fort. She had to be brought out alive. She is the *only* one to come out alive, understand?"

"What of the padre?" asked a Frenchman.

"I said she was the only one to come out alive! We will circle and charge the fort from behind. You will open a way for me, and keep it open!"

VII

THE FLAMES from the burning fort rolled high, so that the distant yellow cutbanks across the river came into view, but the light was uncertain and Boone Clifton was at a loss to understand the melee of battle around them.

When the heat of burning logs made the stockade untenable, he sent a portion of his force outside to form a ring, using any fallen horse, or rock, or depression in the earth for protection. The others he ordered out the back way to hold a line of retreat to the crooked, steep-sided draws cutting back into the shelf of prairie so powder, and lead, and provisions could be rescued from the fire.

Indians galloped up sometimes as close as fifty paces to fire their rifles, but there was no leadership—no concerted effort.

Old Pizon crawled to Boone, his face streaked with blood from a bullet nick, and the blood plastered over with dirt.

"Them Bloods and Piegans are after each other's hair, and if you want my opinion it's on account of Father Benedict. He went and wished us a miracle, and I aim to get baptized first thing when the fight's over. By the way, whar is the Father?"

"Over yonder by that steep-sided draw with Mary."

The bellowing voice of Wappu Franchette came to them from among the flames warning that the powder magazine was about to blow. Boone and Pizon ran around the stockade, circling in opposite directions.

The powder exploded with a roar that shook the earth, hurling brands from the burnings buildings high in the air. For a

moment it was light, and Boone stopped at the draw to locate Mary.

She was not there. A dark form lay stretched on the ground. He bent over Father Benedict.

Father Benedict had been beaten over the head, but he was not seriously wounded. He roused up after a while.

"Mary? I do not know. Levet came. I tried to fight him..."

They could not have more than a three or four minute start. The only escape was up the draw. Boone ran along its crooked bottom until the cry of battle grew dim behind him. He paused and shouted her name. There was no answer.

He went on. The draw became more steep sided—more crooked. He paused again. "Mary!" he shouted.

There was a slight movement from a large clump of sage on the steep bank ten or twelve feet above. Boone flattened himself against the near side of the wash, expecting a bullet from ambush. Shonard Levet laughed quietly.

"You cannot get away so easily, my friend. You must expose yourself whether you try to escape either up or down the draw."

Boone did not answer. He didn't dare. It would reveal his location, and he knew that Levet's pistol was ready.

Levet went on, "I had an idea you'd get on my trail, so I waited for you. Mary is up here. I'm sorry it was necessary to bind and gag her. Would you like to say something to her, some word of farewell, perhaps, before I kill you?"

There was no way Boone could bring his rifle into play. It was useless in such close quarters. He shed his jacket, twisted it around the rifle stock, and flung it against the bank behind him. He hoped to draw Levet's fire. Levet jumped at the movement, but he did not shoot. His shifting disturbed the soft earth of the bank. His foot appeared for a moment, and Boone seized it.

Levet fought to free his foot. The loose earth gave way and he plunged to the bottom amid choking dust.

Levet still held his pistol. He twisted, bringing the muzzle around. He pulled the trigger, and the powder singed Boone's cheek. He tried to swing the barrel, but Boone rocked back, making the blow miss.

They locked in a clinch and staggered against one of the steep cutbank sides. Levet drove his knee for Boone's groin and laughed through his teeth when he felt the blow sink home. He pushed himself back, drawing his knife to finish the fight.

Boone was bent double. He seemed to be holding his abdomen. Levet paused a bare fraction of a second to pick a spot to plunge the blade. He drove it toward the small of the back where the kidney lay, but Boone had twisted away.

Too late, Levet saw the tomahawk. His scream of terror was cut in half.

Levet plunged to the far bank. He rammed against it, spun over on his back, and very quietly slid to the bottom.

Boone stood over him for a moment, breathing deeply. It seemed strange to see Levet so still.

The shooting back at the fort had died away. The comparative quiet seemed unreal after the last frenzied hour.

He shook himself as one awakening and climbed the bank to where Mary lay. He unbound her.

"Boone!" she said, weeping from relief.

He hadn't thought—she had been lying up there, not knowing who had been victor in the fight. He held her close.

"Will you be my wife, Mary?"

"Of course."

"I'll take you to St. Louis—away from all this."

"No. I want to live here, with you, in the home we have won at the Marias."

THEY went back and found whites and Assiniboines throwing up a dirt barricade. Dawn was an hour in coming. With the first rays of yellow over the mountains, Hind Shot rode up, bearing in his hand a calumet. Boone met him, and they exchanged greetings.

"We have driven off the Bloods," said Hind Shot, "and we offer you peace."

"Peace? For how long?"

A hint of a smile played across Hind Shot's clay-daubed face. "The white man who looks for peace does not come to Blackfoot country. It is true?"

"It is true!" said Boone Clifton, and they smoked the calumet together.

In that instant, Gussie knew fear.

PAY YOUR WAY, BUTTON!

By THEODORE J. ROEMER

Nobody in that hard-driving wagon-train believed young Gussie Mays could hold the grueling pace or stand up to skulking dangers. But the plains knew a man when they saw one.

THEY BURIED his pa three days out of Fort Kearney. Obediah Eddy, as captain of the wagon train, said some words as prayerfully as he could and his daughter, Ginny, sang something soft and churchy although nobody had asked her, then everybody went back to the camp and he put up the old iron

tire rim. With his pa's punch and hammer he'd worked on it all night.

BIG GUS MAYS
BLACKSMITH
1805-1869

Finished, he stepped back from the heap of freshly-torn sod, a ragged, long-haired youngster, and the red ball on the eastern edge of the prairie came up and into his tight dry eyes. A keen northwest wind rippled the morning prairie unfolding the miles of lonely land and Gussie Mays bit his lip hard to keep the tears from coming. He was alone. His pa was his only kin, and he'd died from a bullet received in a fight over a card game. And his pa was no gambler, hadn't even been in the game. He couldn't understand it.

A golden plover sounded out on the prairie. Then its mate and a meadowlark chimed in heralding the dawn. Obediah Eddy was shouting from the lead wagon. Gussie stepped farther back and took one more look at the gaunt tire rim sticking above the prairie. The meadowlark seemed to cry, "Charlie Brant killed him! Charlie Brant killed him!"

He turned and ran.

Red-bearded young Jason Foster rode up on his black gelding half an hour later and stepped aboard the second-hand Studebaker which had been Big Gus May's blacksmith wagon. Obediah Eddy had put the Studebaker second in the train that day—the No. 2 wagon behind his. There would be little dust there.

"The Cap'n is giving you a break, son," Jason said, chuckling. He nodded forward. "Wouldn't be the sight of his sorrel-maned gal up there is to cheer you, would it?" He clapped his hand on Gussie's knee and threw back his rusty-colored head in the way Jason Foster had in laughing.

Gussie had never cared for the fancy-shirted freighter. He had joined the train at the last moment with his one wagon of supplies for Fort Laramie. Foster had been in the card game with Charlie Brant the night his pa had been killed.

Gussie said, "I wouldn't be a-knowin'," and he tightened his hand on the reins of the four mules. He had never spoken to Ginny Eddy.

"A nice lookin' little filly if I ever saw one," Foster said, laughing again. The girl, hearing his laughter, turned and then went forward to sit on the spring seat beside her father.

Foster chuckled, slyly this time, Gussie thought, and he disliked the man still more. "What do you want?" he asked bluntly.

"I reckon, son, you know the deal me an' your pop had."

Gussie nodded. "You lent him one hundred dollars ag'in this wagon team, and the blacksmith tools back at Independence. Five percent interest every month, all to be paid back at Fort Laramie."

"That's right. You seen the note, I guess. Now, son—"

"Don't call me son."

Foster frowned. "Well, kid, I come to make you an offer. I don't know how your pa ever figured on raising one hundred dollars at that God-forsaken hole called Laramie, but now that he's gone I'll give you a decent offer, 'cause I don't want to take advantage of a seventeen-year-old youngster."

"Eighteen."

Foster shrugged. "I'll give you another hundred and the hull outfit is mine."

"What you want with a blacksmith outfit?"

"Blacksmith, hell! I want the wagon an' mules. I'm in the freighting business. What do you say?"

GUSSIE fingered the ribbons. His dad had paid more than two hundred in Independence and every mile west increased the value of the mules and wagon. Besides there were the blacksmith tools he'd brought from Indiana. It wasn't enough, and yet to lose it all if he couldn't pay back the note...

Why had his pop made such a bad deal? Why had he borrowed that hundred and where was the five hundred his pa had from selling out in Indiana after Mom died? Surely it wasn't in these four mules and this wagon. They hadn't cost near that much.

His pa had died in a coma without a word about any of that, and not a cent in his pockets. Gussie muttered, "I'll think it over."

"Think fast, kid. That offer ain't going to be open for long." Foster swung over

onto the black gelding and rode on ahead.

Gussie saw Foster tip his hat with marked politeness to the slender, dark-haired girl but she looked straight ahead. Eddy and Foster conversed, glancing the while at the two scouts out on the prairie rim at the two points. Gussie knew they were talking about Indians.

After a while Foster rode back, passing Gussie without a glance. Gussie also ignored him. He looked with soft bitterness at the two distant riders. One of those buckskin-clad men was Charlie Brant, the man who had killed his father.

The day passed.

Camp fires glowed ruddily in the prairie dusk and around the chuck wagon blaze the loud talk and card games were already beginning as the cook prepared the evening stew. Old Ed, the cook, tossed a cedar bucket to Gussie and he was glad to leave the swearing waggoners. Charlie Brant and the other scout hadn't come in yet.

At the creek Gussie dipped the bucket.

"Hello," a voice spoke out of the darkness. He turned quickly. Ginny Eddy sat on the bank, unashamedly holding her bared feet into the water. Her gingham dress was drawn almost to her knees.

Gussie tried to keep his eyes from her slim ankles and swelling calves that the dusk and clear creek water couldn't hide, and he stammered an answer.

Her laughter was throaty and warm. "You never speak to me. Are you afraid of me?"

He shook his head, though he knew he was. He said, "Thank you for—for singing so nice this morning."

She splashed her feet and the dim light revealed she was pleased. "It was nothing. I—we all felt sorry for you. Father says your pa was a good man in the train. It was just an accident he was standing behind Jason Foster at whom Charlie Brant fired. Father won't let them drink anymore at their card games. He's even threatened them to take away their cards if there are any more fights."

"It is too late now."

She arose quickly at his tone. She stood so close before him that he could smell the fragrance of her black hair. It wasn't really black, he knew, for a score of times when he thought she wasn't watching he had stared at that hair. Though dark, it gave out gleams of bright dark fire as the sun shone through it in certain ways. Back in Indiana he had seen the same flame in the mane of a black horse bred from a sorrel dam.

"Don't feel that way, Gussie." She came closer.

He trembled. It was the way she had said his name. He knew she was but seventeen and he eighteen, but she wasn't for the likes of him, a penniless fellow in rags with his father's outfit mortgaged unredeemably. She was more for a man like Jason Foster who had means and money. His fingers tightened on the iron handle of the bucket. He opened his mouth to speak—

The raucous, booming laugh of Jason Foster came from behind them and Gussie turned to see Foster and Captain Eddy walking along the creek bank. And Obediah Eddy's long, wrinkled face was darkening up like a thunder sky.

"They're young 'uns, Cap't. Can't be helped on a trail like this," Jason Foster boomed and slapped Eddy on the shoulder, but Ginny's father, Gussie saw, was in no mood to take it lightly. His eyes showed fury.

"Ginny! Git back to camp! Whar's your shoes, you—you shameless hussy?"

Gussie swallowed. "Captain Eddy, I—"

The girl gave him a quick glance and shook her head. She snatched up her shoes and disappeared through the fringe of willow toward the winking fires.

Gussie was still holding the big heavy cedar bucket full of water. He looked at the two men and his own anger gathered. Obediah Eddy had no right to call his daughter a hussy. And that sly smirk on Jason Foster's handsome face—

For an instant he had the urge to fling the water full upon the booted, tall freighter who was laughing silently at him, but he turned and went toward the chuck wagon, carrying the heavy bucket of water as if it were nothing, he was that angry.

CHARLIE Brant came in late. He was a hulking, hard-eyed man who smelled continually of wood smoke, greasy buckskin, and horses and when he walked he glided. He seldom talked. Whiskey and cards were his loves and he was never seen without the octagon-barrelled Colt thrust inside his sagging buckskin shirt.

He glided from the horse corral into the firelight and Gussie saw the black eyes eat around the circle to him. Then they jumped over him, rested momentarily on Jason Foster, and finally settled on the stew pot over the coals. When he'd filled his bowl he ate noisily like an animal. Gussie was fascinated.

In the cold horror he had of the man, he wondered why the buffalo-killer had singled him out first thing, and then jumped to Foster. He could have sworn he had seen hate flicker in the oily, sharp eyes as Brant looked at the tall freighter.

When the men had eaten, Brant joined the wagonners and drivers in a game but Foster sat still, his fancy back against the hub of the chuck wagon, a long-stemmed pipe trailing idle smoke up into the pull of the fire. Gussie saw his eyes were across the circle of wagons to the home fires on the other side and they were watching with a speculative light the fire of Obediah Eddy. The girl was doing the supper dishes.

Gussie was surprised to find himself suddenly speaking. "She doesn't like you Foster."

The tall freighter turned mildly astonished eyes to the slim youth who had arisen across the fire and was now standing with feet apart and hands clenched at his sides. Old Ed, the cook and only other man around the fire, stared in amazement.

"Yes, I mean it," Gussie blurted. "I c'n see it in her eyes when you get near her, when you and her paw sneaked up behind us tonight."

Old Ed's jaw dropped. But Jason Foster didn't burst into that horse laugh Gussie expected him to because of the way he had said that last statement. Instead Foster's hazel eyes narrowed. He tapped the dottle from the pipe.

"I suppose," he said slowly, "you measure up, who ain't big enough to wipe his own nose yet. Who ain't got a penny to his name. You're a damned pauper, Mays. Now will you shut your fool, gabby mouth?" Deep anger stirred in the hazel eyes. And Gussie then knew Foster knew the girl hated him. And it was a terrible blow to his pride.

Back in Independence, Gussie remembered Foster making the various deadfalls with a painted strumpet on each arm, buying drinks for all the girls. His father had even remarked, "That freighter who signed up with us is a hell-rake if I ever saw one." And suddenly Gussie wondered if it were Ginny Eddy's pretty face and wondrous form that had impelled Jason Foster to freight with this slow-moving oxen and mule caravan. His palms grew hot inside the clenched fingers.

"You stay away from her!"

"Shut up!"

The card players turned.

Gussie's feet went wider. His shoulder's bunched. "I say—"

"Kid,"—old Ed broke in sharply—"pipe down your talk, an' come help me with these pans. You're startin' a fool fight." The old man had seen the glints in the freighter's eyes. Foster was on his feet now.

"I won't shut up. I won't let you—"

IT was hard to say how it would have come out between the eighteen-year-old boy and the tall freighter if a step hadn't sounded in the grass outside the fire circle and Obediah Eddy hadn't appeared. The gaunt Missouri farmer had seen the tail end of the ruckus but didn't know what it was about. His eyes, which he now fastened on Gussie, however, were definitely hostile.

"I come to have a settlement with you, young Mays."

"What kind of a settlement?" Gussie said truculently.

"When I formed this caravan I reckoned a man-jack to every wagon to help the hull train along. Some's come who didn't have it, like the two widow women, an' Preacher Stokes, an' thet newspaper man who is ailing. Them I charged twenty-five dollars fer driver fees an' protection. I'm askin' twenty-five dollars of you."

The boy stiffened. "But I can drive myself! I can do a man's work! I can shoot a gun jest as good as you or old Ed there!" Fear had crept into his voice. He didn't have twenty-five dollars. And if he were cut out, had to go back—He wanted to go on! On to Oregon where Ginny Eddy was going! It suddenly came to him in a sweeping, mighty, all-im-

"If you got twenty-five dollars." The words came clipped.

pelling urge.

GUSSIE stared at the hard-faced captain. And this morning he'd thought the man was his friend. Then he saw it. Obediah Eddy didn't want him around because of his daughter. Eddy knew he didn't have twenty-five dollars.

Gussie clenched and unclenched his hands. Sweat grew inside the linsey neckband of his checkered shirt. He wanted for the first time in his life to swear, to fight, to swing on a man—it was a different feeling than that against Jason Foster of a minute ago. This was desperation.

"I—uh—"

Jason Foster's drawling voice cut through the night. "I'll pay the lad's fare, Cap'n. Twenty-five you say?"

Gussie spun. He gaped and, as he stared, the tall freighter drew out his money belt and unfolded yellow currency in the flicker of the campfire. He handed it to the captain of the train who in turn was so astounded he almost dropped it in the fire.

When Obediah Eddy was gone Gussie wheeled upon Jason Foster. "Why did you do that?"

Foster shrugged. "My offer now is only seventy-five for your outfit." He turned and walked to the card-players circled about their blanket.

The train was up and moving before dawn the next morning. The white schooners lumbered and snaked through the grassy hills and searched out footing across heavy sloughs, keeping to the ridges when the scouts could lay their course along the contour of the prairie swells.

The blacksmith wagon was not the No. 2 vehicle this day. But Gussie Mays did not care too much; his heart was a conflict between a score of emotions—his anger at Obediah Eddy and Jason Foster, his suspicion at Foster's strange assistance, his cold desire for vengeance against the animal-like Charlie Brant—but over all these raging emotions swept the soothing thought that Ginny Eddy liked him.

He looked down at his heavy dusty boots, at his ragged homespuns, at his square boyish hands on the reins, hands that already showed promise of great strength, and he raised his eyes to the sky and his heart sang.

He saw the wild-fowl clamoring northward for the summer's campaign of nesting. Everywhere the sky was harrowed by the wedged wild geese, their voices as sweet as organ tones. He felt the keen northwest wind, that always blew these days, against his face and he saw the flock of white clouds sweeping southward. Always the clouds came, there never was a let-up, and under the clouds walked their shadows, slipping over the lovely hills like rising and falling like dark ships on emerald waves. And with all this came the myriad voices of the prairie—curlew, plover, killdeer, bob-o-link, meadowlark—until the blacksmith boy thrilled as he plodded with his four mules in the ruck of the wagon train ever westward.

Ginny Eddy liked him!

The campfires glowed like ruby stones in the night of the Upper Platte country. The grass had given way greatly to sand and rock. They were approaching the borderline of the Cheyenne country. The Sioux and the Cheyenne were ever roving these barren stretches for a killing or plundering either against themselves or a luckless emigrant train that wasn't too well protected. They wanted guns, the standard of trading and the rule for a killing in the Indian country.

Gussie hunkered around the chuck wagon fire with the others, for the nights were cold in these higher altitudes. Charlie Brant was telling in his low, growly tones about the way to fight Indians and how to circle the wagons.

"Surprise is the thing to watch out fer," he said. "Iff'n yuh got time an' the bunch is big, the bes' thing is to unload the wagons an' dump 'em on sides with wheels stickin' out. No arror c'n split a wagon plank an' a dozen guns c'n stand off a hundred red devils."

Gussie was only half listening. He had seen Ginny Eddy a score of times in the past two weeks but not to talk to; her father saw to that. The story had gotten around the camp and the women made nice talk of it. Gussie had overheard some of it. "...Why, he's pore as a church mouse...I hear tell Jason Foster has his hull outfit boughten already...Obediah doesn't like it nohow. When Virginia marries, I heerd him often say, she's goin' to git somebody with means...You mean somebody like Jason Foster. He and Captain Eddy are real friendly..."

Gussie always moved away when he heard such things; it seemed the women sometimes talked purposely like that when he was near. And he knew he was regarded as the camp waif, parentless, not big enough to be a man, helpless, of no earthly good to the train as it fought its way up the trace.

GUSSIE threaded sand between his blunt fingers and his jaw muscles were knotted. He was getting just a little tired of being kicked about in this camp. And as for stony-faced Obediah Eddy—

"...whut we need from now on," Charlie Brant was saying, "is some more scouts, two at least to guard our back trail goin' through some o' these canyons."

"Do you think that is absolutely necessary?" Obediah Eddy's voice broke from outside the circle. "We can't spare any wagonners."

Brant shrugged. "I tole yuh we needed more scouts goin' up over these mountains, way back in 'Dependence."

There was silence. Everybody knew Obediah Eddy was a close man. Finally Jason Foster spoke up. "I'll volunteer for scouting the back trail. I have my black gelding."

No one else offered.

Gussie tossed the sand from his fingers. "I'll go," he said.

They looked at him.

Obediah Eddy finally said, "What will you ride?"

"One of my lead mules. I can rig up some single-hitch in the blacksmith wagon for the other. They'll lead behind a tailgate."

There was silence again. No one else offered so Obediah Eddy shrugged and went back to his wagon fire. Jason Foster smiled thinly and Charlie Brant fastened his black eyes steadily upon the boy across the fire, Gussie saw all this. He began threading sand off-hand through his fingers and he knew he had gained a niche among these tough, trail-hardened wagonners.

The sod country had definitely given way to rock and arid plains although the keening air gave promise of mountain grass and pine farther up. Gussie rode Jonesy, his lead mule. Often the wagon train was a small cloud of dust to his left and ahead as he coursed back and forth, alerted for any sign of Indians. Sometimes he saw it clearly against the red setting sun as Obediah Eddy pressed forward over a rocky stretch trying to make water for the horses and oxen. It was at times like this that Charlie Brant had instructed them to watch for Sioux.

"They hang like sick dogs to your trail, scoutin' where you bed down, plannin' their attack, then—when yuh least 'spect it—"He drew a grimy finger around the top of his furred and dirty head with a quick, decisive motion. Jason Foster had laughed and wet his lips. "We'll watch the red devils."

They saw something on a distant butte the second day which could have been a coyote or a crawling Indian. The third day from his place at the drag Gussie saw the slow-moving train of schooners had stopped. He waited, puzzled, for a long time then a man came riding toward him and he saw it was Charlie Brant.

"Eddy's wagon broke down. Tire rim came off an' felloe busted on a rock. They been tryin' to fix it outta your black-smith wagon but can't. Wonder if you can do it."

Gussie nodded. "I reckon." He'd helped his pa hundreds of times putting in felloes and spokes and resetting tire rims. He rode in silently beside the man who had killed his pa and Charlie Brant said nothing either, but Gussie felt the scout's eyes on him measuring him strangely.

With draw-bar and chisel he fashioned a piece to fit the broken wheel and from the train's spare wheel parts secured spokes which he drove home with heavy expert blows. With measuring fork and marking wheel he gauged the rim and wheel, heated the rim, and using the rim shrinker, brought it to proper circumference. Then he heated the entire rim and set it, quickly thrusting it into the tub slacker to cool the iron so it wouldn't burn down the wheel leaving the rim loose.

He worked fast and expertly and the men watched in silence. Gussie felt the presence of the girl up on the wagon load but he didn't look up. Obediah Eddy was watching him with strange, cold eyes.

When Gussie was regreasing the skein to put back the wheel, hooves sounded up

the line of wagons. Jason Foster was coming at a gallop.

"I saw something! It was crawling along that red rimrock! It looked like two Indians!" He was out of breath, and there was little color to his skin under the reddish beard.

Brant swore. "Git back there! You know the signal! Two shots of the rifle. You damned fool, yuh let us all be unprotected!"

"But I'm alone out there—" He caught himself. "I—I just rode in to tell you."

"Then git the hell back there like Jim's watchin' the front," Brant said with an oath. Gussie wasn't sure but he again thought he saw the flicker of hate cross Brant's eyes as he'd noticed one night back on the prairie. Jason Foster's eyes veiled suddenly as if he also saw it and in their hazel depths something stirred that he attempted to hide.

BRANT sneered and caught his horse by the reins. "I better go take a look-see," he said to Eddy. "Shove on an' see if you can find water fer the night." He crawled onto his horse and Gussie, his job finished, tossed his tools into the Studebaker and pulled himself onto the mule. "Yuh don't have to come," Brant said. "Yuh jest did a man-sized job."

Gussie shrugged. "Three rifles is better'n two." He kicked the mule in the flanks.

They rode three abreast back into the east and the dun-colored hills rose about them. They made a wide circuit of their back trail and Brant searched the line of red rimrock Foster pointed out, but his oily, black eyes could make out nothing strange and with a grunt he turned his bay back toward the shallow valley in which the caravan lay. Gussie and Foster rode silently behind him as they entered the narrow defile of a rocky canyon.

It was mid-afternoon. The horses were sweating, and yellow dust from their hooves settled on the men. Stinging deer flies plagued the three and their animals, and Gussie was just beginning to long for a pull at the water from the cask slung under his wagon, when Brant raised his right hand in the time-honored trail sign meaning halt.

Gussie and Foster pulled their horses to an instant stop. For a moment all three sat there like yellow-coated statues, then Foster said, "What is it?" Gussie didn't know whether it was the dust or what that made Foster's voice croak like that. He sat his mule, tense, eyes racing ahead and around the rigid buckskin-clad man.

Brant's low voice came back to them. "I heard a rock fall. Wheel your horses and—ugh!" Gussie heard the impact, saw Brant stiffen. The bay, already in command, was running. Foster yelled, "Indians!" and as if in response a score of shadows appeared above in the rocks and death-singing arrows whipped through the air down upon them.

Gusssie's mule was hit but the stubborn animal wouldn't go down. Foster screamed something but the high-pitched yelling of the savages drowned it out, and the white men's animals charged three abreast back down the canyon.

More savages appeared and shafts glinted in the low-lying sun's rays. The ragged hat Gussie was wearing was plucked magically from his head. Foster screamed again, "They got me! They got me!" but the way he kicked his black gelding Gussie knew he wasn't hit. The mule had a hard time keeping up to the other animals. Gussie kept kicking it in the belly. Then all three hit the mouth of the canyon.

At that moment Gussie saw Brant sliding from the saddle.

He yelled at Foster and yanked the mule up beside the slowing bay. He grasped Brant as he lost his last hold.

"Give a hand here," Gussie shouted. "We'll tie him on."

"The hell!" Foster shouted. "He's done. Look at that arrow in his belly. An' so's your mule. Git on his bay. They've got ponies hid an'—"

A high-pitched yell sounded from up the canyon. The Indians had dragged their ponies out of hiding. Gussie could see them flinging naked legs over mounts. In a half minute all hell would be bursting around them. And, even as he thought this, the wind went out of his mule and he felt the animal sag and begin kicking.

Gussie sprang off the animal. "Give me a lift here, Foster, and I'll hold him on—" But he was shouting to empty air. Jason

Foster was down the plain, fanning it hard as the black could take it.

In that instant Gussie knew fear.

Brant, in his arms, with one leather-clad leg still over the saddle, trembled and then opened his eyes. His big, dirty mouth widened into what Gussie knew was meant to be a grin, but was instead a horrible death grimace. Brant whispered, mouthing an oath, "The dirty yellow-belly. Go on, kid. Drop me an' take Jesse."

Gussie saw the Indians pouring out of the canyon. He turned away and acted. He heaved the huge bulk of Charlie Brant up into the saddle and clawed up over the blood-stained blanket and leather behind. He shook the reins fiercely and, with both arms about the huge swaying man, gripped the pommel in a hunched over position, kicking the bay with a frenzy, spurred by the racing hooves behind.

Foster had disappeared but Gussie remembered the way they'd come, and the big bay carried his double burden with mighty bounds over rock and soft sand and clumps of buffalo grass. Gussie was thankful Charlie Brant was a good judge of horseflesh. They out-distanced their pursuers and when they came in sight of the circled wagons the Indians melted like shadows, reluctant to come into view of the caravan.

Jim Buckmaster, the other scout, lifted the unconscious Brant from the saddle and as tenderly as a mother carries her babe, he carried the huge bulk of Brant to the blankets by the chuckwagon fire.

GUSSIE slid from the rump of the winded bay. He wiped the blood from his hands and then he saw Foster through the circle of excited shouting wagonners. Foster was ash-grey. He had arrived at camp a few minutes before but still was so struck with fear that he knew no shame. And Gussie knew he was but a hollow man—a man for money and women and tinsel.

Obediah Eddy met Gussie with sharp, excited eyes. "How many were there? Sioux or Cheyenne? Where did they jump you?"

Gussie told the story briefly, omitting the cowardly part Foster played. He said simply, "My mule was hit so I jumped on behind Brant an' came in."

Jim Buckmaster, who had come back, asked sharply, "Charlie was hit first, wasn't he? So he says." The grizzle-bearded Buckmaster peered intently at the blacksmith boy.

"Is he alive yet?" Gussie asked.

"Conscious for spells. The arror went down into his vitals from the breast bone. He'll live till mornin'."

Gussie saw Ginny was there holding a kettle of hot water and some cloths in the other hand, but Buckmaster with a choked growl sent them all away and, with Old Ed, the cook, alone helping, took care of Charlie Brant.

Gussie moved across the circle of wagons to the Studebaker. Halfway across a hand touched his arm. It was Ginny. "You're —you're wounded."

He shook his head. "Some of Brant's blood." He saw the lights in her hair. He saw the black lashes and brows, and deep larkspur eyes. There was infinite crying tenderness in their depths. He shook his head again, numbly, and turned and hurried to his wagon.

The camp was in readiness for attack as the sun went down. As greyness stole from the east and shadows sprang with startling abruptness from every shrub and rock around the encircled wagons a tenseness crept over the little valley. Buckmaster had ordered an inner barricade for the women and children and in this circle of boards and stoves and crated supplies the women huddled on blankets with their children. But no one slept. Behind some of the lighter wagons which Obediah Eddy had ordered overturned, wives crouched with husbands ready to reload, or to fire if the gun fell from their men's hands.

The Studebaker, facing the mouth of the valley toward the rear, was one of the first to be lifted to its side after emptying its contents. But it took the combined efforts of ten men to lay the vehicle on its side and Buckmaster swore through his grizzled beard. "Who the hell would ever think that wagon would be so heavy?"

Gussie and two waggoners crouched behind it in the growing dusk, and Gussie thought of the good rifle he'd lost, and this poorer one he had in his hands. And of the lead mule, Jonesy, he'd lost also. He scratched the growing beard on his cheek and felt like muttering one of Jim

Buckmaster's favorite curses. Things were sliding backward for him rather than bettering.

It was quite dark when a hand gripped Gussie by the shoulder. "Charlie wants to talk to you, button." It was Buckmaster's growly voice.

GUSSIE was surprised to find Ginny Eddy taking care of Brant. He nodded awkwardly and dropped beside the man. The girl looked at him quickly.

"Quiet," she whispered. "He's dying."

He looked at her and held his tongue. A step sounded behind them and all three turned. Jason Foster was standing at the hub of the nearer wagon. He had a rifle in his hands, but it was obvious he had crept to the position to hear the conversation. When he saw they had noticed him, he moved away, and Buckmaster growled an oath.

"The damned tinhorn! It's something about him that Brant wants to tell you, Mays. He keeps mumbling about you, an' Foster an' your pappy."

"My pa?"

"Lissen!" Buckmaster leaned forward.

Brant moaned and his lips twitched, then opened. "Dirty damned scavenger . . . pay me . . . drunk . . . yuh bribed me . . . with likker . . ." The mumbling fell off and the rattle once more began deep in the hairy chest.

Gussie waited half an hour but Brant was going rapidly. He was barely breathing at the end of that time. Gussie arose.

"I better go back. Iff'n he says anything, you tell me later," he said to the girl. He went back to his station.

There he remained to look out into the inky, starless night, waiting for that first fateful grey in the east which would decide the attack.

It came with startling suddenness, even before the dawn. The first inkling was a flare behind rocks. Then the blackness was streaked with burning arrows, and at the same instant guns burst forth and with a howl the savages charged, riding horses from every protected concealment to which they'd sneaked their mounts.

The lighted arrows fell on the canvases of the up-right schooners. Some lit inside the inner circle to fire the women's and children's blankets and the tarpaulins from the over-turned wagons. In a minute a score of fires were blazing, growing, lighting the place with unwanted light. The heavy rifles of the riflemen boomed in response to the hellish sound of the Indians, and the superior weapons of the white men told against the Sioux's arrows. But fire, the red devils' chief weapon, was gaining and it was the manner in which the Indians had planned.

"Sacks! Wet your sacks!" Buckmaster's roar swelled through the night. "Morgan, Thoms, Welsher!" He called men he knew by name away from their rifle posts. Girls and women were running from water barrels with wet sacks and pieces of blanket and were beating at the flames. Other arrows were shooting into the circle, carrying new fire, and all the while Indians were riding like mad around the enclosed wagons adding to the hellish din and trying to terrorize the whites.

But Obediah Eddy was at one end and Jim Buckmaster at the other, directing operations. With bare hands the men tore off flaming canvases and stomped out the fires. Some were hit by the arrows that had no fire. Gussie felt a dozen thud into the bottom of the Studebaker. He reloaded and fired, and did it so many times that in the intense excitement he lost track of them and of time, and he was surprised to see it was grey dawn and that the Indian howl had changed in note and suddenly there were no more running around out there, only a few wounded, screaming animals. He looked for fallen Indians and saw none.

In astonishment he exclaimed, "But I swear I hit some, at least five!"

One of the wagonners leaned back and wrapped a soiled blue handkerchief around his bloody shirt sleeve. "They always cart 'em away. An Injun never leaves his dead. It's about the only good thing one c'n say about the murderin' devils. Look!"

GUSSIE turned and stared. The camp was a shambles. As he looked at the half-burned, torn waste a dull shot sounded across the circle as if some man had taken a last pot at a vanishing redskin, and he saw men and women crawl out from beneath wreckage and barricades and he saw them also stare around at the

damage the attack had done Obediah Eddy's Oregon train. Then Buckmaster came roaring through the camp.

"Half the men stand at posts. Can't tell, but hardly think it likely they'll come back agin. Other half start cleanin' up this mess. Burn all them rags an' busted boxes. Somebody go down to the other side an' check the horses. See if—"

"Mr. Buckmaster! Mr. Buckmaster!" It was a girlish scream. Gussie turned as if needles had jabbed into him. He recognized Ginny Eddy's voice.

She was coming across the enclosure, hair flying in two long braids, dress billowing, and her eyes were wide with horor. "I went to get some water. The noise had brought him around, and he wanted to tell me something. But when I got back with the water he—" She faltered, gasping for breath. With one bound Buckmaster was past her for the chuckwagon. Gussie followed.

Ten steps away he stopped and thrust the girl back. Jason Foster lay by the campfire dead, and across on the blankets lay Charlie Brant with his octagonal-barreled gun in his right hand. Brant was lying on his side, oily, animal eyes fixed steadily on the dead freighter.

"Charlie!" Buckmaster shouted.

Brant twisted his lips without taking his eyes off Foster's body. "Jim," he muttered. "I come back—long enough tuh kill him. He was waitin' to get me—all these weeks — the double-crossin' yellow-belly. Me an' the button."

"What is it, Charlie?" Buckmaster lowered his voice.

"He bribed me with likker, Jim. An' he promised me a hundred bucks at Laramie iff'n I'd do it. I was drunk when we trumped up that quarrel at cards. I didn't shoot at Foster. I aimed at the button's pappy . . ." His voice weakened.

Gussie heard and his heart grew still. He knelt down beside Buckmaster. "But —but why did Foster want to—to do it?"

Brant struggled to open his lips. Pain showed in his glazed eyes as he realized he couldn't speak, but already the pain was dulling. Gussie clutched the blanket edge with his fingers, waiting . . .

A hoarse shout came from the other end of the enclosure. "Guns! Guns! Hundreds of guns! Come! Look." A waggonner came running wildly.

Obediah Eddy grasped him. "What are you shouting about?"

"Guns!" the man gasped. "In the blacksmith's wagon! There's a double floor and between it packed solid is hundreds of brand new Sharps rifles and bullets by the boxes! Man! Zeke an' I were havin' a smoke when I noticed a arrow chipped off a corner of the plankin' an—"

Gussie turned back to the dying man. "Is that it? Guns? Jason wanted guns?"

The man's eyes lighted. He tried to speak. He trembled and grew still.

Gussie came to his feet. "So that was it," he said. "Pa got a buy on some guns and was short a hundred dollars. Jason lent it to him, planning all the time to kill pa an' take possession at Laramie."

THE girl's voice broke in softly, "Charlie Brant wanted to tell you. Don't think too harshly of what he did. Jason Foster got him drunk."

"Yeah." Buckmaster's rumble was choked. "Charlie was bad only when drunk. Foster was fixin' to sell the Sharps to those red devils, like as not. Your pa got a market for those guns at Laramie—scouts, buffalo hunters, trappers. I'd give my eyeteeth fer one myself. You're a rich man, button."

Gussie wet his lips. He felt a small hand creep into his and he looked down. The sunlight was coming over the range to the east. It caught the girl's hair. It gave out gleams of dark fire, the same smouldering flame that he'd seen in one of his pa's black horses bred from a sorrel dam back in Indiana . . . This girl, who had sung something soft and churchy and unasked at his pa's burial . . .

He closed his growing, strong hand hungrily over her small hand and he lifted his eyes challenging and unafraid to Obediah Eddy across the circle of men.

At the challenge in the boy's eyes a smile tugged across the rocky features of the train captain. Obediah Eddy said, "I made up my mind watchin' you fix that broken wheel." He turned and walked away.

Gussie squeezed her hand. "I reckon, Ginny, me an' your pa'll get along."

AMBUSH FOR ONE

By JOSEPH L. CHADWICK

Twenty men stealing through Apache country. Twenty men suddenly caught in a red-hot Apache trap. And young Dan Lonergan thinking he would fight for himself only!

THE TRAIL of the wily Geronimo had been lost somewhere in the torturous Cauldron Basin, and now the weary twenty-man patrol made its night camp without cook fires or fresh water. As was whispered about, when the Army lost the Apaches it did not mean that the Apaches had lost track of the Army. It

It was a wild nightmare of a ride.

could easily be a case of the hunter becoming the hunted.

Food was a matter of rancid bacon, weevil-infested biscuits, brackish water out of canteens. Veteran troopers cursed their lot, and wondered aloud why they had joined up. Dan Lonergan, the recruit, strolled through the camp whistling some gay dance-hall tune. He was cursed roundly. One trooper growled, "Stop that locoed whistlin', you. It's bad luck."

Dan Lonergan halted and peered about at the vague shapes men made in the dark. He laughed softly and said, "What's wrong, Burke? You skittish about something?"

Burke swore a round oath. He was a burly Irishman and, as Dan Lonergan well knew, afraid of nothing. Burke was like the other troopers, fearing nothing that walked or rode the earth, yet somehow fear had gotten its chill grip upon every man in the detail. It was a fear of the unknown, of having trailed the Apaches too far and too long—without getting the marauders in their carbine sights. It was an eerie thing in the night, and Dan Lonergan—suddenly sobered—realized that even grown men can be afraid of the dark. He himself felt not as he should. There was a queer emptiness in his belly—not hunger, not real fear, but a feeling of dread.

Dan tried to shake it off. He always moved with a swagger, and now he tipped his campaign hat to a jaunty angle. He took a deck of cards from inside his tunic, riffled them with deft fingers, and said, "If we had a fire, we could have a game of blackjack."

"Shucks, dude," muttered another trooper. "You've already cleaned us out. My last month's pay is in your poke."

"Your I.O.U.'s are good with me friends."

Burke heaved up, saying, "Lonergan, ever since you came into the company I've been wanting to tell you to go to hell. I'm telling you now. *Go to hell!*"

Dan smiled through the gloom. Burke was a dozen years older than he, yet he spoke in a fatherly tone, as to a child, "Whenever you're home, Burke, I'll drop in."

He could actually feel Burke's hatred; he could sense the hostility of the other men. It was not a strange thing to him, for he knew that he was to blame. He had come into the cavalry a rew, green recruit, contemptuous of the Army and military life.

He had mocked rules and regulations, and the dreary routine of barracks life. He had joined up with a chip on his shoulder—a chip no man had yet been able to knock off. He had changed dudish clothes for cavalry blue, but he had not changed his civilian outlook. Yet he had taken all that the Army had to offer in his stride and even now, with danger in the very feel of the air, he was still full of laughter and mockery.

"This detail of old women," he now said, "should do its soldiering *only* on the parade ground of Fort Winston. Get a good night's sleep, little ones — for by morning Geronimo might come after your scalps."

He turned and sought his blanket. His amusement had faded from him, and now again he was aware of that odd heavy emptiness inside himself. The desert was all about them, dark and mysterious, and keen Apache eyes would be watching. Somehow, Dan Lonergan knew he was one of twenty men in a trap. And suddenly he hated the Army...hated it more than he had hated it the day he joined up.

UNDER cover of his blanket, Dan Lonergan lifted a cheroot. The blanket guarded the flame of the sulphur match from any watching Apache eyes. The cheroot was good, expensive tobacco; it was too high-priced a smoke for a twenty-two-dollar-a-month trooper, but Dan Lonergan had come into the Army with a poke. The cheroot partially eased the queer feeling that had gripped him, and he thought *"Nothing's going to happen to me. The Lonergan Luck will see me through.*

He believed that, now that he weighed all things. He always had been lucky at cards, in love, at making money, and he would be lucky at soldiering. Some of these men—silent with their own dull thoughts this night—would die before the patrol was ended, perhaps before it kept the rendezvous at Bolton's Ranch. But he, Dan Lonergan, would live. He would live and he would laugh—and when the time

came he would, as he had planned from the start, quietly desert.

"Dan—you, Dan. I've got to talk."

The whisper came in a frightened voice from the dark. Dan turned and saw that it was Ike Swann, a skinny hatchet-faced man with a pair of sly and secretive eyes. Ike Swann came to him on hands and knees, flattened beside him. He was making himself small, as though fearing a sniper's bullet. Ike Swann had enlisted at Winston the day Dan had joined up, but, having served previous enlistment, he was no raw recruit. Now he fumbled something from his pocket and thrust it out to Dan. Dan took it, and the feel of it was paper money.

"Here's some of the money I borrowed from you, Dan-boy," Ike Swann said in that whispering voice. "I want to pay up my debts."

Dan was surprised, puzzled. He had given Ike Swann money, a great deal of money, and it had not been a loan—but blackmail. Ike Swann knew about Dan Lonergan's trouble up in Dodge City; knowing Dan was running from that trouble, he had followed to demand blackmail—offering his silence for cash. A dirty business. Funny, Dan thought, that Ike Swann should want to wash his hands clean now. He stared at the runty man.

"Ike, what's eating you?"

"Dan, I'm going to die!"

"You—! How you know?"

"I had a sign."

"What kind of a sign?"

Ike Swann shivered. "I looked behind me today, just before sundown," he muttered, "When we were heading west." He caught Dan's arm, gripped hard. "I wasn't throwin' no shadow!"

Dan for once forgot his mocking laughter. He could see how ashen gray Ike Swann's face was, and he knew that the man believed every word he had uttered. No good to jeer at such fears. No man could explain to Ike Swann that a man riding in the sun had to throw a shadow. Sign or no sign, Ike Swann knew he was a dead man.

"Don't think ill of me, Dan-boy, for taking your money."

"Forget it, Ike." Dan forced the money back into his hand. "Take the money. When we get back to Winston, get yourself a honky-tonk girl and a keg of forty-rod. Shucks, Ike, you'll live to be a mossy-horn with a long gray beard."

Ike Swann said, "Not me, Dan—not me," and crawled away to his own blanket.

Dan Lonergan thrust his cheroot into the sandy earth, his enjoyment in it suddenly gone. He had hated Ike Swann for bleeding him, yet now he could only pity the man. Ike Swann was a poor excuse of a man; he was different from Dan Lonergan, a whole world different, and he hadn't even been able to cut in on the Lonergan Luck through blackmail. But Ike had kept quiet about that trouble in Dodge, when a more honest man would have talked and turned Dan Lonergan over to the Law. For once in his life, Ike Swann had tried to grab something for himself. Now he was a dead man in his own mind.

That trouble in Dodge...

DAN had tried to forget. He had been blamed, but the fault hadn't been wholly his. It had begun over a dance-hall girl named Lil Benson. She worked in Len Stacey's Palace; she was young, young in years and experience, and a man looked upon her and saw the freshness of spring on the countryside. Lil had yellow hair and blue eyes, a flawless beauty. She was more than an ordinary honky-tonk girl; she sang for the Palace crowds, and she had a small sweet voice that stirred even hardened men. Many men had eyed her, desired her, but Len Stacey, a ladies' man, called her his girl. Lil denied she belonged to any man, and, defying Len Stacey, had become friendly with Dan Lonergan.

Dan Lonergan had a way with women. He fell for Lil Benson, but, being no man to be tied to a woman, he did not take their friendship too seriously. But Len Stacey, jealous, had taken it seriously. He sent two hardcases to beat up Dan Lonergan, to spoil his young looks. But Dan was too tough a hand, and he sent the two hardcases running.

Then he went hunting Len Stacey for a showdown. Stacey drew a gun; they fought against one another, the gun went off, and Len Stacey fell with the look of death on him. Knowing Stacey had friends who would want revenge, Dan left Dodge in a hurry—that very same night.

That was three months ago. Dan had kept running, having heard that he was being hunted by the Law. He had sought a place to hole up in, and the Army seemed the best place. Back in Dodge, he had been known as Dude Long. He enlisted under his own name and by donning a uniform he had lost all his individuality. Only Ike Swann, trailing him from Dodge, had discovered his hide-out. Dan called himself lucky. But then, the Lonergan Luck alway held...It might even hold out against the Apaches.

"You, Lonergan—wake up!"

SERGEANT DEVLIN'S harsh voice roused Dan from his reverie. The sergeant's boot roused him from his blanket. Devlin didn't like Dan Lonergan any more than did the rest of the blue-clad troopers.

"The Lieutenant wants you, dude, on the double," growled Devlin. His voice soured with sarcasm. "Wants your advice on how to capture Geronimo, no doubt."

Dan buttoned his tunic, dusted off his yellow-striped breeches, set his campaign hat at the proper angle. The detail's officer, Lieutenant Royce, was a stickler for military niceties, and Dan was careful to respect them. He wanted no trouble with the lieutenant.

Royce was a tall blond man, but a year or two older than Dan Lonergan. He was a West Point officer, a quality he forgot not one moment. Royce stood before his tent, the only one the patrol boasted, and he returned Dan's salute with drill ground stiffness.

"The Lieutenant wished to speak with me, sir?"

"Yes, Lonergan. Step inside."

Dan followed the lieutenant into the tent, greatly puzzled. He never before had been personally addressed by Royce, and he had the feeling that this boded him no good. Royce risked no lantern; they faced one another in the obscuring gloom.

"Lonergan, you're a good soldier—so far," Royce began. "You learn well, you obey orders smartly. But there's one fault you have. You're brash. You're by far the brashest recruit I've ever encountered. You don't like the Army, Lonergan."

It was a question. Dan answered it honestly. "No, sir, I don't."

"A small thing," Royce went on. "Lots of men don't like the Army, once they've found out what it's like. But you don't like your fellow soldiers. That's bad. The Army, Lonergan, is not a loose gathering of individuals. It's not simply a band of men. It's a team, a unit—big or small, as the command may be. And, to quote an old adage, one bad apple spoils the whole barrel in time."

Dan said nothing to that, but stood stiffly at attention and waited.

"You rub the men the wrong way, Lonergan," Lieutenant Royce said. "Your brashness made you a pariah in your own company, and tonight I detected open hostility against you in this detail. Ordinarily, I'd not discuss this with an enlisted man. But I've given you time, hoping that your sergeant—or one of the men—would change your outlook. What I'm getting at, Lonergan, is this: We're deep in Apache country and we're bound to have to fight before we reach our rendezvous with Major Harmon's column. When we fight, we can't have one man playing his game as an individual. You, Lonergan, will have to forget you're a misfit. You understand?"

"I think so, sir."

Royce's face was frowning in the dim light. "Good. But I'll put it into word, anyway. If we're attacked, I want you to show the detail that you're fighting not only for yourself but for them, and for the Army. Anything you'd like to say, Lonergan?"

"One thing, sir, with the Lieutenant's permission," Dan said. "I do not hate any man in this Army. There was one man I did hate enough to want to kill him, but tonight—well, sir, I changed my mind."

"Then your attitude, Lonergan?"

"Sir, my father was a gambler. He worked the Missouri riverboats, the Barbary Coast, the mining camps. He made and he lost fortunes. He died with a bullet in his back and a ten-thousand-dollar poke in his pocket. But they buried him in Potter's Field—because someone stole that poke off his dead body." Dan's voice was rock-hard now. "That taught me a lesson, sir. All men are strangers, and not one of them is to be trusted. When I fight the Apaches, I'll be fighting for my own life—and to hell with anybody else!"

A silence came, was heavy between them.

Dan could sense disappointment in Royce. He though, *A decent sort, this Royce. He believes what he preaches, but in a tight hole would he stick to his principles?*

Finally Royce said, "That is all, Lonergan. I see it is no use trying to reach the good in you with words. You may go."

Dan saluted, about-faced smartly, and left the tent. He was frowning as he strode back to his blanket. The other troopers were watching him; he heard chuckles, and he knew that they believed he had been dressed down. He removed hat, tunic and boots, and crawled into his blanket. He tried to sleep, but his mind was racing. He could not forget Royce's words. But the officer was wrong, Dan told himself; in Dan Lonergan's case he was wrong. He was one against the world. John Lonergan had so reared him. And John Lonergan's whelp had done all right...He had lived by his wits, coming afoul of the Law only because of a woman. A deck of cards had kept his pockets filled with money. Let Lieutenant Royce hold to his own philosophy of life. He, Dan Lonergan, would look out for Dan Lonergan—and nobody else.

But it was a strange thing. Dan lay there unable to sleep. He thought of Ike Swann who had turned straight when he feared death was near. He thought of Lil Benson, and was suddenly lonely. He had planned to break things off with the girl, even before Len Stacey busted thing up between them. It would have been hard on Lil, for she had lost her head and her heart to him. She would have cried...*Maybe,* Dan suddenly thought, *she is crying now—because of me.*

He groaned aloud, wishing he could sleep.

From the darkness came Ike Swann's scared whisper, "Dan-boy, what's troubling you? You see a sign, maybe—you see a sign?"

Dan didn't answer. He fell asleep finally, a moment after wondering if the Lonergan Lurk really would hold to the end of this patrol.

IN THE MIDDLE of the night, the patrol was quietly wakened. Sergeant Devlin went about rousing the men, urging them to be quiet. Lieutenant Royce was breaking camp, making a forced night march so as to fool the Apaches. It seemed that the officer also felt that the camp was a trap, that the Apaches were nearby and making ready to spring that trap. A smart officer, thought Dan Lonergan. *Boots and Saddles,* even though no bugle blared out. Twenty men mounted. A command was softly spoken. The patrol headed into the desert darkness.

Cavalry in motion lifts its own distinctive noises. Men might speak in whispers, but shod hoofs strike rock and shale and cannot be wholly silenced. Sabers rattle in scabbards, accoutrements clatter, and there is always the sharp creak of saddle leather. A horse nickers, loud in the night, and men curse softly. Sounds on the desert travel far, and Apache ears were notoriously keen...

Dan Lonergan again felt that heavy emptiness inside him. He could see the pale pinched face of Ike Swann through the gloom. Ike Swann rode beside him. Ike Swann said, "Dan, there's something I've got to tell you—"

"Quiet!" muttered Sergeant Devlin.

Ike Swann's voice, full of panic, was louder than he realized.

Dan Lonergan found that the night can be long, that it can be an eternity. The very stillness of this night was eerie; it sapped men's courage, knotted their nerves. They peered into the night's black curtain, and swore that they glimpsed alien shapes traveling with the detail. But finally the night hours dragged by, and the first faint trace of false dawn was in the eastern sky.

"Bolton's Ranch five miles ahead!" The whispered word was passed along the column.

Dawn, a pink-graying of the faraway sky. Dawn, a time of peace upon the world.

Dawn on the desert, a howling band of Geronimo's Apaches...They struck the patrol on its right flank, rifles blasting and stabbing the pale light with lurid flame. A trooper cried out, slumped in the saddle. Other men swore, and, without waiting for the command, drew saddle carbines and fired pointblank into that tidal wave that seemed about to engulf them. Dan Lonergan fought as he had told Lieutenant Royce he would fight—for his own life. A gun was his destiny, and all else was nothing.

In the red haze of battle, Dan Lonergan was like a drowning man who, going down for the third time, sees his whole past in one quick flash of his mind. And in his past were things that made him ashamed. Lil Benson...The pretty picture of her was in his mind's eye, and as he fought for his life Dan Lonergan thought, *If I had it to do over, I would have married her, made her happy, been happy myself. If I'd married Lil, that trouble with Len Stacey would never have happened,*

The carbine was empty in his hands, and the Apaches were riding against the thin blue line like a savage tidal wave. Sabers! An ugly bloody business...Sabers against Apache lances. Blue-clad men struggling against warriors naked except for breechcloth and high bootlike moccasins. Screams, howls, shouted oaths. Dan Lonergan saw Ike Swann go down, the man screaming. Sergeant Devlin was pierced by a lance, lifted from his mount. Lieutenant Royce was firing his Navy Colt, shouting encouragement to his troopers. Dan Lonergan dodged a rifle shot, and downed a squat-featured warrior with his saber...The tidal wave broke, swept around the troopers. Apaches rode off howling.

Roiling dust, yellow-black gunsmoke hung like a cloud. Horses with empty saddles—cavalry mounts and Indian ponies—ran wildly about. Dead and wounded warriors littered the ground. There were four fallen troopers who never would ride again, and three wounded men —one of them Ike Swann. The Apaches had drawn off to the rock hills to the south, to lick their wounds and to await the reinforcements now pouring out of Cauldron Basin. Lieutenant Royce was watching the enemy movements through his field glasses, his face granite-hard. The Apaches were spreading out, one band heading west to cut off the patrol's retreat toward the Bolton Ranch. The second attack—the final attack, it would certainly be—would come any minute.

Royce turned to his decimated command, and said, "Men, we can't hold out. Our only chance is to make the Bolton Ranch, hole up there behind shelter, until Major Harmon's column reaches the rendezvous." He shook his head despairingly. "It'll be a chase, and only luck will get some of us through. It has to be every man for himself."

Dan stared at him, not quite believing that the officer meant to abandon the wounded. He said, "Sir, we can't let those three injured men behind."

Royce lay a frowning look on him. "Orders, Lonergan!"

"Orders, hell!" Dan Lonergan shouted.

He was as scared as any man; he was sickened by this bloody fighting. But something in him rebelled. It was the helplessness of the wounded men that made him lose his grip. The other troopers were staring at him. An Apache rifle cracked; the sniper's bullet struck Lieutenant Royce in the back. With a groan, the officer slid from his saddle. His face blanched, twisted with pain, Royce said, "Ride, men! You, Lonergan—obey orders!"

Some of the troopers were swinging their mounts, making ready to ride off for the Bolton Ranch. Dan drew the carbine from its saddle boot. The weapon he knew was still empty, but he levelled it.

"We're taking the wounded, men," he said. "You, Hanley, take the Lieutenant. Hatch, take Sergeant Devlin. McGarran, you take Duprez."

The troopers named obeyed, perhaps not because of the threatening weapon but out of some deep and decent instinct. Dan dismounted and lifted the thin Ike Swann in his arms. He put Ike Swann in the saddle and swung up behind him. The other wounded were now mounted and held by the others. "Now we'll ride," Dan Lonergan said.

It was a wild nightmare of a ride, but the patrol made it. They shot and cut their way through the Apaches—not each man for himself, but in a body. Troopers not burdened with wounded men did the fighting. Two men were killed on the way; one more was wounded but managed to ride through. And Bolton's Ranch was a place to fort up in.

BIG Luke Bolton had put up his building against such a time as this. Ranchhouse and barn were of thick logs, and every wall had a loophole for gunfire. Bolton and his three hands gave the weary troopers a hand. The wounded were carried into the house and lain on bunks, and of the wounded only Ike Swann was dying.

Ike Swann kept calling for Dan Lonergan. "Dan-boy," he whispered, as Dan knelt beside him. "Dan-boy, you're a white man. I'd be out there tortured by those red devils now, if you hadn't sided us poor souls."

"I couldn't leave you behind, Ike," Dan said, and only then did he realize the change that had taken place in him. For the first time in his life, he had unselfishly given of himself to others.

Ike Swann's voice was hardly louder than a woman's sigh, saying, "Dan, I tried to tell you last night...Len Stacey didn't die, that night in Dodge. He was just unconscious and looking dead, when you high-tailed it out of town. He recovered, and the Law can't really do much to you. I kept it from you, Dan, because—"

"So you could blackmail me," Dan might have said. But he said nothing at all, for Ike Swann was dead.

He covered Ike with a blanket, and from the next bunk Lieutenant Royce was watching him. The officer's face was pale and filled with pain; he would suffer until the Army surgeon arrived with Major Harmon's column. Royce said, "Lonergan, step over here,"

Dan obeyed, and came to attention. He had his moment's fear, recalling how he had disobeyed orders out on the desert. Court martial? It might be. He did not want that. He wanted his Army record clean. Maybe he had refused to obey an order, maybe he once had hated the Army, but now he wanted his record clean. Dan Lonergan was a changed man.

"Lonergan," said Royce, "take the lieutenant's bar off my tunic."

Dan obeyed, vastly puzzled.

"Now pin it to your own tunic, soldier." Royce's eyes were dimming; he was losing consciousness. "You are in command of this detail, Lonergan, until relief comes. You will defend this place..."

Royce's voice trailed away. He gave Dan a wispy smile just before losing consciousness, and it was clear that there would be no court martial. Lieutenant Royce knew when a man had learned a lesson . . .

The Apaches were attacking the ranch now, in great force. Dan Lonergan picked up and loaded his carbine. He shouted orders to his fellow troopers, and, strangely, they obeyed without complaint. Gunfire racketed, powder-smoke filled the ranch-house...Men would fight until it seemed they could fight no longer, then fight some more. They would fight until relief came, each man with his fears and his hopes.

Ike Swann was dead, and others would die. But those who died would die so that other men, here or elsewhere, could live—in peace and security. That was the idea of it all. There was no selfishness among soldiers, and under fire a man learned that. Dan Lonergan fired through his loop-hole at the circling, howling, shooting Apaches. And promised himself, *I'll write a letter to Lil, soon as I can.*

He had something to share with Lil Benson. Lonergan's Luck? Well, maybe. But maybe a man must share himself with his fellow men, and with some woman. Give as well as take...Dan's carbine grew hot in his hands. He looked about the smoke-filled room, at the men who were fighting for his life as well as for their own. He was no different than they, for he was one of them. A strange thing, truly. A wonderful thing...

BLEACHED BONES AT SCALPKNIFE STATION

By L. P. HOLMES

THROUGH THE SMOKY blue, chill twilight, a west-bound stage of the Overland Mail and Express Company rolled down the high, Wyoming plain and pulled to a halt at Scalpknife Station. Pawnee Jack Crouch, the driver, called out, "Get down at Scalpknife Station. All out for the night!"

On the box beside Pawnee Jack, Burk Stanley stretched long arms and said, "Farthest I ever traveled to reach a job."

Pawnee Jack emptied his bearded jaws of a well-masticated cud of black strap. "It's my guess that inside the next month you'll ride a durn side further to get away from it. There's a reason why there's always a job open at Scalpknife Station, why Ben Holladay is allus scratchin' gravel tryin' to keep that job filled. The reason is Nick Spade, the toughest station boss between the Missouri and the Sacramento. With Nick Spade lookin' down

Butchering, blood-crazed Indians kept a safe distance away from the lonely, horror-haunted stage stop. Burk Stanley came from the battlefield to find out why—and learn how evil death could be.

yore neck, you'll earn all you earn, and a leetle bit more. Sometimes I wonder why Ben Holladay keeps Spade on, and then, thinkin' about it, I know. This is bad Injun country, with White Knives and Goshiutes runnin' wild. But, knowin' Nick Spade and his ways, they fight clear of Scalpknife. I'm wishin' you luck, younker, but warnin' you plumb serious. Don't get Spade down on you."

With that, Pawnee Jack Crouch climbed down from the high box of the Concord stage and Burk Stanley followed him. The passengers, all men, emerged wearily from the stage's interior, too numbed by hard travel to speak. A couple of hostlers were already unhitching the horses.

Burk Stanley extracted his battered old canvas-sided gripsack from the stage boot and headed for the larger of the two buildings which made up the Sandy Creek stage station. Both buildings were built of sod, squat and ugly. Behind one of them, the smaller, spread a corral. Yellow light shone through the open door of the larger building. The mingled odors of

It was a stage and a team of four gone completely mad and berserk.

wood smoke and cooking food lay in the still, chill air.

It was the late fall of 1865. A great and sprawling nation, still in its infancy, was still trembling with the aftermath of a mighty struggle that had come perilously close to tearing it asunder forever. Burk Stanley had taken part in that struggle. He had been one of that weary, battle-scarred, half-starved legion of the Confederacy which had given its all so gallantly and so fruitlessly. He had been one of the thousands at Appomattox who had listened to General Robert E. Lee's brief farewell address, and then watched that great man ride sorrowfully away. And he had been one of those who, through the magnanimity of another great man, the bulldog-jawed Ulysses S. Grant, had been allowed to keep his horse, as Grant had put it, to do his spring plowing.

But Burk Stanley had gone back to no plowing. He had not gone back at all. There was nothing to go back to. The war had seen to that. Out where the sun went down, so men said, was a brand new land, vigorous and wide and untouched, where a man might take up life anew, where adventure called, where the trails were open and beckoning to anyone with the vision and hardihood to follow them. So Burk Stanley had set his battle-worn horse's head toward the sunset and rode.

AND NOW here he was, put down at this ugly little stage station crouching in the chill dusk of a wide and lonely land. He strode through the lighted doorway, with the far off wail of an early prowling coyote quavering in his ears.

The building, it seemed, was one big room, with the earth for a floor. In the center stood a long, roughly built table and a number of benches. On the table stood several empty whiskey bottles, each holding a flickering candle. On three sides of the room, except for the space occupied by the door, rude bunks were built, one above the other. On the fourth side was a huge hearth and fireplace, where pots bubbled and steamed over the flames. Crouched before the flames, tending the pots was the formless figure of a woman in calico. Beside her and aiding her was a slim youth in buckskins.

Standing beside the table, feet spread, doubled fists on his hips, stood a tall, superbly built man. His legs were long and muscular, his flanks lean, made even more so by the tightly drawn folds of a gaudy Mexican sash. From there his torso tapered up to magnificent shoulders, filling his buckskin shirt almost to bursting. His hair was long and black, falling to his shoulders. On either side of a beaked nose, bold black eyes challenged each man as he entered the place, with a look at once contemptuous and shrewdly measuring. And the mouth under the drooping black mustache was sneering and arrogant, as though this man saw in these weary, silent travelers a lesser breed than his own bold dominating self. His voice held the same domineering note.

"I'm Nick Spade, boss of this station. And I mean — *boss!* What I say goes. You'll eat the food served, and like it. You'll sleep in one of those bunks—and like it. And when you pull out of here in the morning, I'll be as glad to be shut of you as you are of me." And then he laughed, in a malicious, taunting way, as though waiting for some challenging retort by one of the new arrivals.

None, it seemed, was forthcoming. Perhaps the others were too dead weary to argue with anyone, or, hearing something of Nick Spade and his ways at various stations along the back trail, they had no desire to stir him up. So, with the exception of Burk Stanley, they selected empty bunks along the walls and lounged there, wordless and contained with their own thoughts.

Spade's black eyes settled on Burk Stanley, noted the gripsack he carried and sneered, "Comforts for the night, eh? What are you, a damned dude?"

Burk extracted a folded paper from his pocket and held it out. "This will explain," he said. The soft melody of a Southern drawl was in his voice.

Spade took the paper, spread it and read—slowly, forming each word with moving lips. His head jerked up and he rapped out harshly, "So-o! A new roustabout, eh? Another jelly-spined, chicken-livered, puling roustabout. Why in hell can't Holladay send me a man for a change? Well, what are you standing there gawping about? Get out and get to

work. There's horses to be fed and brushed and curried. Work to do. Understand? Work! That's what you came out here for. And work you damn well will, with Nick Spade to see that you do!"

If Nick Spade expected this outburst to reduce his new roustabout to quaking, subservient jelly, he was mistaken. Cool grey eyes, gone just a trifle smoky, stared steadily back into his own arrogant black ones. Abruptly Spade realized that this lean, tawny-haired young fellow's eyes were on a level with his own and though not as heavy through the shoulders, there was in Burk Stanley, a wiry compactness that suggested tempered sinew and fibre.

"I expect to work," said Burk Stanley steadily. "I'm not afraid of work. No need getting all lathered up."

He went over and tossed his gripsack on an empty bunk, and went out into the dusk again, crossing to the other building and the corral. He found the two hostlers there, caring for the horses. "The name," he said quietly, "is Burk Stanley. I'm the new roustabout. Tell me what my job is and I'll do it."

They seemed to be measuring him in the thickening dark. Then a deep, slow voice said, "Lord help you. Me, I'm Barney App. This is silent John. There's another of us who'll be riding in directly. Stinger Denton. He's Spade's pet. Watch him. Whatever you say or do while Stinger is around, will get to Spade's ears directly. Your job? Everything. You can help us with this team right now."

Though he couldn't make out Barney App's features in the gloom, Burk Stanley instinctively liked the man, liked the slow, deep way in which he spoke and the note of quiet kindliness in his voice. Silent John lived up to his name, acknowledging the introduction with a single murmured word, "Howdy!", then saying nothing more.

FROM App, Burk learned that the station help slept in the larger building, and ate there, right along with everyone else. "Company rule," said Barney App. "In case of Injun attack, everybody is together, instead of divided up. By the sound of your voice, you're young. Take an old man's advice and be on Jack Crouch's stage when he rolls on West in the morning. Keep going to anywhere, so long as it ain't here."

"Scalpknife Station is where Mr. Holladay sent me to work. Scalpknife is where I stay," Burk told him.

Barney App murmured again, "Lord help you."

They curried and brushed and watered and put the hungry animals to mangers full of wild hay in that smaller building, which now turned out to be a three-sided feed shed. Out in the night came the mutter of approaching hoofs. Silent John stepped clear to listen. He said a single word. "Denton." Then he spat.

"A coyote, Stinger Denton," rumbled Barney App softly. "A sneaking, slickery coyote. He'd like to be another Nick Spade. Allus aping Spade's ways. He'll run a blazer on you if he can, younker."

Through with the team, Burk Stanley and two hostlers were about to leave the corral as Stinger Denton rode up and dismounted at the gate. Instantly he discerned three figures where he had expected but two.

"Who's the third one?" he demanded, his voice thin and droning.

"New roustabout," informed Barney App curtly. "Burk Stanley by name."

"Hah!" exclaimed Stinger Denton "That's good. Here, you, take care of my bronc. See that you give it a damn good currying and rub down before you manger it. Lively, now!"

Burk Stanley made no move. But he drawled, "Take care of your own bronc."

For a moment Stinger Denton was plainly startled, getting a cool, cutting reply where he had expected at best sullen subservience. Then Denton cursed. "One of that kind, eh? Well, I've learned your sort manners before, and I'll damn quick show you—!"

Stinger Denton broke off abruptly as a whizzing fist crashed into his face. He had been moving forward on Burk as he spoke and Burk had measured him solidly. The punch put Denton back on his heels, tottering, arms waving wildly.

Old Barney App hissed, "He's a knife man, younker. Watch out!"

Burk was watching. He was taking no chances at all in this wolf's den of a stage station. He moved in, soft and fast before Stinger Denton could get his jar

red senses together. He hit twice more, left and right. And then Stinger Denton was down, senseless in the dust.

Burk Stanley said evenly, "We'll go eat, now."

II

BARNEY APP reminded Burk Stanley of an ancient, weathered walnut. He was of the same color, and wrinkled just as deeply. A stocky, grizzled old fellow, gnarled and bent from harsh toil and hardship. Silent John was lank and bony, in face and body. The moment they got Burk Stanley in the full candle light, they gave him a swift, measuring scrutiny, and the look in Silent John's eyes was that of one gazing on a condemned man.

The woman in formless calico and the slim youth in buckskin were setting the table with heavy, crude china dishes. It was one of the boasts of the Overland that its patrons ate off real crockery. The woman was gaunt, faded, weary and slattern, all semblance of personality long since beaten out of her by toil and hardship. The youngster in buckskin, however, was lithe and quick and strangely graceful in movement, with a brown, curly head.

Burk Stanley wondered a little about this until, when the youngster leaned far out over the table to deposit a huge bowl of steaming provender in the center of the board, the candle light brought into clear relief a face too smooth and softly colored and regular of feature to be anything but feminine. Startled, he understood. The youngster in buckskin was a girl!

Nick Spade kicked a bench up to the head of the table and sat there. "You eat now," he told the silent stage passengers. "You'll eat and like it. Maybe it's elk meat, maybe it's antelope, maybe it's dog. But you'll eat it and like it!" And he barked his arrogant laugh again.

The food was good, hot and savory. Hungry men ate with a raw relish. Burk Stanley, last to seat himself, was on the end of a bench, with Barney App at his left. From where he sat, Burk could watch the door. Directly across from Burk sat Pawnee Jack Crouch, bearded jaws working steadily.

The first edge of hunger removed, Nick Spade said, with sudden harshness. "Thought I heard Stinger ride in. What's keeping him, App?"

Barney App glanced at the door and nodded. "There he is."

Stinger Denton was holding to the wall for support, still dazed and dizzy on his feet. His lips were puffed and split and leaking blood. He had tried to wipe that blood away and smeared it across his broad, queerly flat face.

Nick Spade's glance leaped like a tongue of fire and he jumped to his feet. "What happened to you?"

Stinger mopped his lips with the back of his hand, coughed and spat, then pointed at Burk Stanley. "Slugged me," mumbled Stinger thickly. "Wasn't expectin' it . . ." He coughed and spat again.

Nick Spade came around the table, black eyes hot with purpose. "Thought so," he grated. "Thought so the minute I laid eyes on you. Lesson coming to you!"

Pawnee Jack Crouch looked across at Burk Stanley and nodded sadly. "Younker, I warned you."

The smokiness was in Burk Stanley's eyes again as he came erect. He did not back away from the on-coming threat of Nick Spade. Instead, he stepped forward to meet Spade as the latter made the turn at the lower end of the table. Burk's hand slid under the buckskin jacket he wore, came into view bearing the blue-black bulk of a Dragoon Colt revolver. With a quick, hard stab he drove the muzzle of the gun against Nick Spade's body.

"If," he said, in that mellow drawl of his, which now held ice in it, "you want it, you can have it, right here and now. Back up, Spade—back up! Keep backing up—fast!"

FOR a moment Nick Spade stood, feet spread, body pressing against that deadly gun muzzle. But the snarl on his face was frozen and the hot purpose in his eyes was momentarily veiled by something only Burk Stanley saw.

"Thought so," Burk murmured. "Seldom fails. The big noise is to cover up. Trouble is, somewhere along the trail, somebody gets tired of the bluster and calls it." His voice took on that icy snap again. "I said—back up, Spade!"

Nick Spade backed up, clear across the

room, until the racked bunks were against his shoulders and he could back no further. And there, his neck swollen with the poison of his helpless fury, Burk Stanley held him at gun's muzzle.

"I could pull the trigger of this gun, Spade," Burk told him, "and all up and down the trail men would cheer to hear about it. But I didn't come out here to kill you, 'specially. I came out here to work for Ben Holladay. I asked Ben Holladay for a job and he gave me one—here, at Scalpknife Station. I'll do my work. I'll hold up my end. But working is one thing. Taking your strut and bully-puss, day in and day out, is something else. I'm not taking it. Get that, Spade—get it once and for all. I'll kill you if I have to, but it'll be because you asked for it. You got all that clear, Spade?"

The room was so still and aghast, the sibilance of Nick Spade's trapped breath was like a snake's hissing. Nick Spade was a big man, physically, but his ego was bigger yet. And now that ego was down on the hard packed earthen floor, trampled under the boots of Burk Stanley.

Blind, trapped fury exuded from Nick Spade like a strong odor. His lips were pulled back so tight they were bloodless, his eyes suffused with a crazy glitter. But that scalding flood of fury broke against the still iciness of Burk Stanley.

"I don't stand rowing among my men," Spade blustered. "Any fightin' they do is where it counts, against the Injuns."

"Stinger didn't tell all the story," drawled Burk Stanley. "Yeah, I hit him—and he wasn't expecting it. But he was coming for me, full of threat. He started the argument."

"That is true enough, Nick," said Barney App, from the table. "Silent John and me were right there where and when it happened. Stinger started it. He was making for Stanley, full of trouble."

It was an out for Spade—not much of a one, but enough. He swung his head toward Stinger and yelled, "You ever lie to me again and I'll have your skin, Denton. You hear me—I'll have your skin!"

He moved away from Burk Stanley toward Stinger—and Burk let him go, smiling coldly. Spade stood over the quailing Stinger, cursing and threatening. Burk went back to the table, sat down and went on eating.

Spade, his first flood of black fury exhausted in invective against Denton, turned back to face the room. And now he was smiling, an expression without a shred of humor in it, but a smile just the same. He said, his voice almost mild, "It's on me. Made a mistake, Stanley. Long as Stinger asked for it, can't blame you for handing it to him." Spade swaggered back to his seat and began to eat.

A lot of little sounds began coming back into the room, people stirring awkwardly after locked moments of suspended motion. Stinger went over to a water bucket near the fire place, sloshed about in it and came to a vacant place at the table and began to eat sullenly, eyes on his plate. Burk Stanley looked around, caught Pawnee Jack Crouch's glance and saw dumbfounded wonder in it.

THE GIRL in buckskin, coming up in back of the stage driver with a bowl of food, met Burk's eyes fully, and her own were wide and dazed as they looked at him, as though she had seen and heard something that her senses would not allow her to believe. Her look was so ingenuous Burk had to smile and then she went red, her confusion so great she nearly dropped the food she was carrying. She fled back to the fireplace like a startled fawn. At the head of the table, Nick Spade cleared his throat harshly and scuffed his boots restlessly.

The meal over with, the stage passengers went directly to their bunks, to make the most of rest to meet another day of arduous travel. Nick Spade went over to the hearth, where the woman and the girl now crouched, eating. He spoke to the woman and while it did not carry clearly enough for any others in the room to hear clearly, the tone was harsh. Then Spade donned a heavy coat, selected a rifle from several racked near the door, pulled a flat-crowned sombrero over one eye and squared to face the room.

"Sleep tight, gentlemen—sleep tight. While you sleep under Nick Spade's roof, no bad little Injun will ever harm you!"

There was mockery in the laugh which followed this. Then Spade jerked his head

toward the outer night and Stinger Denton followed him out into the darkness.

Burk Stanley, looking around for his gripsack, saw Barney App placing it on a bunk and when Burk went over there, old Barney murmured, "Silent John and me, we sleep tol'able light, younker. And Jack Crouch ain't what you'd call a heavy sleeper. So, you sleep—here!"

'Here' was the bunk under the one Pawnee Jack Crouch had crawled up to. And it was between the ones Barney and Silent John were set to occupy. Burk understood. He could sleep this night without fear of a knife in his back. His eyes warmed as he met the glances of the three old timers. And, as they were breaking out their pipes, Burk brought out his tobacco pouch and handed it around to the three of them, to let them know he understood and how he felt.

Hoofs thumped outside, dwindled away. Stinger Denton came in and climbed into a bunk across the room, throwing Burk a single venomous glance before stretching out and turning his face to the wall.

III

THIS WAS frontier country. Beyond the sod walls the world ran away in vast, dark sweeps to distant, black mountains, as yet far from being definitely named or correctly placed by the world's geographers. Across this wilderness man had charted a thin line of travel, marking it with the plodding hooves of oxen, with the creaking wheels of prairie schooner, with his own boot and moccasin prints. Since the first wild cry of gold had echoed out of the sunset, thousands of wagons and tens of thousands of weary but dogged humans had traveled over that thin, charted line, and they had marked it not only with the tracks of the living, but with the graves of the dead. And still they came, even though the first mad cry of gold had dimmed somewhat, for land was there to the west, also—free land, virgin land. And land hunger is one of the oldest known to man.

Here along the trace was wilderness, but out there at the western end of the weary trail men were swarming and cities were being built and shouting their wants to the East. One of those wants was communication — mail. And so daring men bought stages to roll, and hired other daring men to drive them. Of the former, one was Ben Holladay. Of the latter was Pawnee Jack Crouch. And passengers, who had the money to pay and the hardihood to dare, could ride with the mail.

Yet, along that lonely trace the wild red man rode his wild pony, to ambush and attack, to plunder and kill. From north or south he came out of the wilderness, and back into it he raced to disappear and make ready for new attack. It was dearly bought, that lonely road, that trail of dreams—dearly bought and dearly held, and the payment was in blood.

These things were what Burk Stanley thought about as, propped on one elbow, he smoked until the ashes in his pipe were dead and chilling. About the room men slept. Over at the hearth the woman and the girl had washed and stacked dishes, hung up pots. On the table the candles guttered low. In a far corner the woman spread a sheet of canvas of rope, shutting off two of the bunks. Beyond this crude barrier of privacy she and the girl would sleep. The girl was the last to slip behind the barrier. Before she did she looked again at Burk Stanley . . .

Work was what Burk Stanley had asked for, work was what he got. From before first daylight to beyond first dusk, stages rolled in, from the East and from the West. Weary teams were taken out of the traces, fresh teams put into them. Five miles south of the station, Sandy Creek broke out into an expanse of meadows all awave with sun-cured wild hay. Along with Barney App and Silent John, Burk scythed load after load of this and hauled it by wagon back to the station, to be stacked against the fodder needs of the coming winter. While at this chore, three of the rifles from the rack by the station door always rode on the wagon, ready to hand.

"The Injuns leave Spade's station pretty much alone, but they're uncertain varmints and you never can tell," said Barney App. "So if you're smart, you bet on your gun instead of your luck."

"Strange," said Burk, "that Scalpknife Station has no trouble with the Indians, while at most of the other sta-

tions along the route they are the main source of trouble. How do you figure it, Barney?"

"I don't figger it," answered Barney, almost curtly. "I never try and figger anything. That's Nick Spade's business, to figger. I just do my work and let things go at that."

From the wagon, placing and tramping down the hay Burk and Barney were forking up to him, Silent John said, "The east ridge!"

They were up there, all right, a full score of them, sitting their ponies like so many statues, with bare, brown torsoes, sun glinting on weapons and the feathers of trailing war-bonnets.

"White Knives," said Barney App. "And liking nothing better than to slit our throats, but not meanin' to try today, else they wouldn't be sittin' up there so smart and sassy."

Despite this assurance, Burk Stanley felt the short hair on the back of his neck bristle. It was instinctive. It was savagery, deep buried under the white man's way of thinking and living, but never wholly eliminated, lifting its head to snarl back at savagery raw and untrammeled, starkly challenging. Even as Burk watched, as one man the White Knives spun their ponies and were gone in a tossing wave of war-bonnet feathers.

Barney App spat and said, "One thing I hand to Nick Spade. Someway or somehow he's put fear of the devil into the Injuns. They might look at us that belong to Scalpknife Station and they'd like to slit our throats. But they don't. They let us alone. We can thank Spade for that."

To which Silent John nodded assent, while Burk Stanley said nothing.

LIFE fell into a groove at Scalpknife Station. Stages came and stages went. New faces at the supper table. New occupants of the frugal bunks. Occasionally a woman, when another bunk was closed off in that far corner with the canvas curtain. Nick Spade came and went, bullying stage passengers with his wild talk and taunts, swaggering and strutting, particularly when a stage held a feminine occupant who was even half way young and pretty. Sometimes he would be gone all day. Now and then at night he would take his heavy coat, his rifle and ride off into the wide darkness.

He had little to say to Barney and Silent John. They were old hands, knew their work and did it, keeping their mouths shut. To Burk Stanley, Spade seldom spoke. When he did it was curtly, but with no open gesture of offense. But always his black eyes burned and Burk thought of a snake, waiting—waiting for opportunity to strike.

As for the other, Stinger Denton, he stayed mostly close about the station, helping with the horses, hauling in sage stumps and roots on an old sled for fireplace fuel. At regular intervals, in the saddle of one horse, leading a pack horse with empty saddle behind, and with a rifle over his arm, he would disappear for a few hours, to return with the pack horse laden with wild meat of one sort or another, freshly killed. Occasionally Spade would take Denton aside, talk to him, and then Denton would ride away on other purpose, known only to Spade and himself.

Several times Burk Stanley tried to get Barney App or Silent John to talk of matters concerning the station. Why this, why that? Always would they grow close-mouthed. That first night they had been willing to see that he slept in security. Barney App had even spoken up in his defense as to the how and the why of his run in with Stinger Denton. They were kindly and gravely talkative about some irrelevant things. But about the station and its handling they said nothing.

Of the gaunt and silent woman, or of the girl in buckskin, Burk saw little, except at meal time. Always, it seemed to him, they were toiling at their cooking. Except one day when Barney App and Silent John went down to the meadows alone for a load of wild hay, leaving Burk to smooth up and cap a finished stack beside the corral. He was in the shadow of this, his task done, waiting their return, when the girl came out of the station house and crossed lightly to the corral. She called to the horses and one of them, a trim little pinto, came over to the girl and licked at her outstretched hand, which Burk now saw was smeared with sorghum molasses. The girl laughed with quick, bright delight and her voice, as she

talked to the animal, was soft and melodious.

So engrossed was she, she neither saw nor heard Burk as he moved up beside her. But she whirled to face him, almost in fright, at his mellow drawling, "Hello."

Burk saw that she would have run, had he not stood between her and the station house. Her eyes, out here in the sunlight, were very clear and blue, and very wide. "You don't have to be afraid of me," smiled Burk.

She gulped, nodded. "I—I know that. But was Nick Spade or Stinger Denton to see me—talking to you, they'd skin me."

"No, they wouldn't," drawled Burk. "I wouldn't let them. What's your name?"

Now she was shy as well as scared. She stammered before replying. Finally she got it out, her voice very low. "Melisse."

"Melisse—what?"

"Melisse—Denton."

"Denton! Is Stinger Denton your father?"

"My uncle." Then she added, with a fierce little burst of anger, "I hate him!"

At that moment Stinger Denton came around the far end of the feed shed and his voice ripped harshly across the intervening distance. "You—Melisse—get back where you belong! You've no business out here, and you know it. You know what I've told you and what Nick Spade's told you. Get back to your chores, or—!"

He had a length of old leather trace in his hand and he brandished it threateningly as he came on.

For a moment the girl faced him, her arms rigid at her sides, her small fists clenched. Her head was up and her eyes were blazing with the hate and scorn she had just voiced. But, as Stinger Denton came closer, Burk Stanley saw her begin to shrink and quail, and knew that memory of former mistreatments at the hands of this man was at work.

For a moment she had been bright and winsome, though delicately shy, and Burk had found that picture of her charming and attractive. But now to see pure animal fear begin to dull her bright eyes sent a shock of cold anger through him. The smoky look was in his eyes as he faced Stinger Denton.

"Touch her with that trace and I'll spear you on this hay fork like I would a snake," grated Burk. "You hear me, Denton! Don't you touch her now, or ever, or I'll break every bone in your damned body!"

Denton paused before the threat of the bright, polished steel tines leveled at his chest. "She'll do what I tell her to do," blustered Denton. "Me and my old woman took her in as an orphan brat. We've fed her and raised her, given her a home. She's my brother's girl and as her blood uncle, he'll do what I tell her, or—"

"No matter. You won't touch her now or ever again. She came out here to say hello to her pony, not to me. She didn't know I was around. I spoke to her. So if you want to try hitting somebody with that trace, try hitting me."

Stinger Denton would have liked to. He would have liked to crucify Burk Stanley on the spot. It was in his eyes, a bleak, sullen, poisonous hatred, raw as acid. But he didn't dare.

Burk said softly, to the girl behind him. "Run along, Melisse. He won't touch you."

Burk heard the rustle of movement as she sped away. Then he leaned easily on the fork. His grin was twisted and mocking and without mirth as he drawled, "Well?"

Stinger Denton blistered a curse, turned and slouched sullenly away.

PAWNEE Jack Crouch was through Scalpknife Station several times driving his section between Moose Jaw on the East and Cottonwood Bluffs to the West. This night, when the west-bound Concord came rolling in to the station, it was Pawnee Jack at the ribbons. When the old fellow climbed stiffly down from the box he came up to where Burk Stanley was unhooking the leaders of the team. He thrust an envelope into Burk's hand, murmuring gruffly, "For you, younker. Silver Caine gave it to me at Moose Jaw and said he'd had it from Bronc Byers at Three Forks. I suspect by the looks of it, it came by one whip to another all the way from Missouri. I dunno what it is, but I was told to give it to you, and there it is."

Burk pocketed the missive carefully. "Thanks, Pawnee. I've been expecting it. You can forget you've delivered it?"

Pawnee Jack stared keenly through the dusk, nodded. "I've already forgot, younker. It's good to see you still with your health. Every time I come through I'm expectin' to hear the worst about you at the hands of Nick Spade or that slinkin' coyote, Stinger Denton."

Burk laughed softly. "They'd like to do many things. So far they haven't got nerve enough to try. Don't waste your worry on me."

"The word's reached all up and down the line on how you made Spade back down, younker. They're layin' bets on how long you'll last. There's a streak of Injun in Nick Spade. He'll wait ten years to get back at you. Sooner or later, he'll try."

"We'll see. What's the news along the trail?"

"About the same. Injuns still raisin' Ned here and there. The boys at Moose Jaw had a little brush with some Goshiutes the other day. Bronc Byers had to shoot his way through Bloody Rock Canyon. He lost one passenger to a Goshiute arrow. And White Knives cleaned out a five wagon Conestoga train on the main trail between here and Moose Jaw. Saw what was left when I came by, and there wasn't much. When'll these damn fool wagon folks learn to travel in big trains that the Injuns are afraid to tackle, instead of skyhootin' off in little five or six or seven wagon outfits that are like a lone buffaler calf in the middle of a band of starvin' wolves? Why, there was women and kids—what was left of them—lyin' there—"

Pawnee Jack swore and stamped away.

The main emigrant trail lay some two or three miles north of Sandy Creek station, which had been placed where it was because of permanent water and the proximity of those wild hay meadows to the south. The side swing of the stage road left the main trail four miles to the east and rejoined it about the same distance to the west.

During the long daylight hours from Scalpknife Station it was possible to see a tawny haze of dust lifting to the north where the emigrant wagon trains toiled on, ever on. Now Pawnee Jack Crouch had told of still another of those wagon trains that had come to its dismal, dreary end in a few mad minutes of tumult, blood and death. *Women and kids —what was left of them...!* Burk Stanley's face was grim as he went in that night to supper.

IV

THE HAY-GATHERING chore was done with. Five big stacks, neatly mounded and capped stood beside the corral. Overland stage teams would eat well at Scalpknife Station during the winter months. Odd jobs were still to be done, repairing, cleaning, soaping harness, bolstering up several of the corral posts that had begun to sag. Burk Stanley, Barney App and Silent John were busy at these tasks when Nick Spade, ready to ride, came over to the corral, caught up and began saddling a horse. He said nothing until he had swung into the saddle. Then he looked down and across at Burk Stanley and his words were harsh.

"A word to the wise, Stanley. Stay away from Melisse Denton. She's spoken for."

Before Burk could answer, Spade was spurring off. Barney App and Silent John exchanged glances and then Barney turned to Burk, his look and voice stern. "What was he talkin' about. Have you and the lass been seeing each other?"

Burk was a little startled at Barney's tone and attitude. "Shucks!" he exclaimed boyishly, "it didn't amount to anything." He went on to explain the incident of how he'd happened to exchange a few words with the girl, of Stinger Denton's threat to whip her, and of how he'd made Denton back down. "I'm damned," he ended, his voice sharpening, "if I can figure why everybody should get in a froth, just because I spoke to that nice youngster. Lord knows this is a hell of a life for her, slaving away in this devil's outpost. And for the older woman, too. Why shouldn't I speak for her?"

Barney App's eyes were boring at him. Now Barney nodded and his manner softened. He dropped a hand on Burk's arm and said, "You're a good younker. The lass is taken with you. I've seen her watching you. She is a good lass, and Silent John and me, we've taken it upon ourselves to see that no harm comes to her."

"What did Spade mean—that she's spoken for?"

A quick flare of great anger and hatred shone in Barney's old eyes. "The world, and all in it, is made for Nick Spade, as Nick Spade sees it. He'll find himself wrong in some things. He'll not touch the lass, while Silent John and I live. What do you think keeps Silent John and me at this—you called it rightly, younker—this devil's outpost, but to see that no harm befalls the lass? Why do you think we stand the swagger and heavy voice and hand of Nick Spade, except to be near her? The trail grows ever shorter for Silent John and myself, and how else better to spend the rest that's left us, than do what we can to see that the lass is done right by?"

"This," enthused Burk, "is what I've been waiting for. To be sure of it. And now I know."

Barney looked puzzled. "To be sure of what, younker? And—you know what?"

"That you can be trusted. That I can speak plainly. I wasn't sure until now for, though there were good signs, also, there were times when you turned silent and would not speak out against Spade."

"Talk gets to Nick Spade's ears, sometimes," said Barney sententiously. "We wish no open quarrel with him, Silent John and me, that would give him cause or excuse for taking our jobs from us. For then we would no longer be near the lass. But now it seems there is reason for straight talk, younker. It will stay between you and me and Silent John, eh, John?" Silent John nodded. "What is this talk?"

"The wagon trains heading west along the main trace are not all like those of the first in the gold madness," said Burk. "Most of the early ones had nothing but their wagons, their oxen, the clothes on their backs. They were crazy with one idea. Gold—and to get to it. Now there are saner folk along the trace. Sounder folk, aiming for new land in a new country. Many have sold out farms in the east, and the money they got for those farms, they carry with them, to aid in the new start they are dreaming of. There are many, many thousands of dollars that roll along the main trace these days."

Barney nodded. "Ay! You are right, there. But what of it, younker?"

"There is," said Burk with slow emphasis, "much money going east, also. By express."

Again Barney nodded. "Ay—that also is true. From California it comes."

"Not all from California," said Burk softly. "Not all! There is, in a bank at St. Louis, deposited under the name of Nick Spade, some seventy thousand dollars. Quite by accident did Ben Holladay learn of this. And he could not help but wonder, knowing the wage he paid Nick Spade as station master of Scalpknife. I had word of another deposit to Spade's account just a day or two ago. It was for six thousand dollars."

Barney and Silent John were plainly bewildered. The sums were almost beyond their comprehension. "But where — how —?" sputtered Barney. "And what meaning is behind your tale, younker?"

"This," rapped Burk curtly. "We agree that many of the wagon train folk of today carry sizable sums with them. The Goshiutes and the White Knives in this territory still strike at these trains. Indian trouble is known at nearly every other station along the Overland's route. Except at Scalpknife Station. It is Nick Spade's boast that his station is free from Indian trouble. But he cannot boast that Indian attack and massacre does not take place along the wagon train route to the north of here. And always Nick Spade sends more and more money to that bank in St. Louis. Now do you see?"

BARNEY'S gnarled, walnut brown features were twisted in deep thought and a growing cold fury burned in his faded old eyes. "I see," he growled. "Ay! I see. 'Tis a black picture you paint, younker. That Nick Spade is in with the Injuns. That the Injuns attack and kill and rob the wagon trains—that the money goes to Nick Spade, for money is of no use to a hostile varmint."

Silent John had been listening intently. Now he stirred restlessly. "A question comes to me. What would Nick Spade be giving the Injuns in return for the money?"

"I've no idea — yet," admitted Burk candidly. "A free hand to do as they will in this neighborhood, maybe. I know that many times men from other stage

stations along the line have gone to the aid of wagon trains, when they have punished the Indians savagely. Have you ever done as much from this station?"

Barney clubbed his knee with a clenched fist. "You've hit it, younker! Recall the day, John, when that poor dyin' devil came staggerin' through the sage down from the north, bring word of the White Knives at work on a wagon train? And Spade would not let us go to help, saying it was too late anyhow — and that we couldn't leave the station here undefended —leave the lass and the woman alone. And that poor devil looked at us queerly and died, and we did not go, because at the time Spade's talk made sense? Ay—recall that day?"

"I recall it," nodded Silent John. "I did not sleep well of nights for a long time after that."

BARNEY looked at Burk. "So this is why you came to the station. From the first I've known a mite of wonder, for there was much in you worthy of more than a roustabout job. Ben Holladay had deeper reason for sending you here. You're to get the truth of Nick Spade and his money. And when you do —what then?"

Burk's teeth came together with a little snap. "Put a stop to it—in my own way. You'll help me?"

"Ay!" said Barney grimly. "We'll help you—John and I."

Silent John, watchful and alert as always, said, "A supply wagon coming. About time. I heard the woman say last night that the flour was getting short."

It was a company wagon, driven by a dour, surly looking character, stinking of raw whiskey. There was sacked flour and meal, beans and salt and other provisions to be unloaded and carried in. Burk Stanley climbed into the wagon, handing the stuff down to Barney and Silent John. The driver got down, circled the station building, where Stinger Denton met him at a corner. The driver pulled a bottle from under his coat. He and Denton disappeared.

Even with the driver gone, the smell of whiskey was strong about the wagon. A thoughtful gleam was in Burk Stanley's eyes as he pushed the final sack of flour to the tail gate of the wagon, jumped down, shouldered the sack and carried it in, to add it to the rest of the provender. The girl was sorting the stuff and as she caught Burk's eye, she smiled and colored and looked away.

The woman was saying to Barney App, "We could stand some fresh meat. Denton won't be going after it today. Right now he'll be busy getting drunk. He always does when Tusco Haartz shows up."

"I'll go get that fresh meat, ma'am," said Burk quickly. "Be glad of the chance to see a little of this new country for a change."

Barney caught the meaning in Burk's eye and nodded. "Ay! Go ahead, younker. But watch out for varmints—they're always hunting, too."

Astride one horse, leading another and with a Henry rifle across his arm, Burk Stanley rode east along the stage road. In the dust of that road lay the fresh made tracks of the supply wagon, made as it came in to Scalpknife Station. Abruptly some two miles out, those wagon tracks left the road, angled off to the south-east, where a couple of bald buttes lifted from an area of broken, rocky country.

Burk took a careful line on the wagon tracks, then went on, keeping to the main road. A mile further on, he found where the supply wagon's tracks came back to the road. He went on, marking all the country well in his mind.

In the dust a flurry of split, heart shaped prints showed where a little band of antelope had crossed the road, heading south. Burk followed the direction of the sign, surprised the animals in a lonely gulch and dropped three of them before they could flee the gulch to open safety beyond. He dressed out the meat, loaded it on the pack horse and headed back for the station. He was within a mile of the station when hoofs sounded behind him and he turned to see Nick Spade spurring up.

Spade's face was twisted with anger. "Not your job to get meat, Stanley," he rapped harshly. "Stinger takes care of that. Your job is at the station."

"Stinger," said Burk evenly, "is drunk. The woman said we were out of fresh meat. The other chores are all caught up. I offered to go. Why shouldn't I?"

"Where did Stinger get the liquor?"

Burk shrugged. "Supply wagon came in. Fellow named Tusco Haartz was driving it. I think he had a bottle."

Spade cursed savagely. "I'll peel the hides off both of them. In the future, you get my permission before you go meat huntin'." Then he was gone, spurring ahead.

V

NICK SPADE was apparently in a savage humor. There was even more of his brag and bullying than usual in his greeting of the passengers who came in on the evening west bound stage. Yet it seemed to the carefully observant Burk Stanley that there was a false note in Spade's mood. That he was covering up. That in reality he was exultant over something. True, he had stormed and cursed at Stinger Denton and Tusco Haartz, who were both too sodden drunk to care or understand. By the time supper was ready, Denton and Haartz were already sprawled on bunks, dead to the world.

Once, during the meal, the girl moved up beside Spade, bringing food to the table. Spade put an arm about her, bending her slenderness toward him. A white, trapped look flashed over her, as she strained back. Something quick and hot leaped up in Burk Stanley's throat and he heard a low growl rumble in Barney App's chest. The woman was watching and she called, not unkindly, "Come, child. This meat is ready to go on."

Nick Spade loosed his hold, then, with one of his taunting laughs.

Burk thought that this was going to be one of the nights when Spade stayed at the station. Usually, when Spade was going to leave on one of his mysterious night rides, he left as soon as supper was done with. But not this night, not until the candles had burned low, when the breathing of sleeping men sounded heavy through the room, until the woman had drawn the canvas curtain and she and the girl had retired behind it. Then Spade left, with coat and rifle and a pair of empty saddle bags thrown over his arm.

Burk Stanley lay, apparently asleep, but listening for the faint mutter of hoofs that signaled Spade's departure. Then, very quietly, Burk slipped from his bunk, pulled on his boots, took a rifle and went out. The night was very dark, despite the frosty glitter of the stars. Swiftly and quietly, Burk caught up and saddled a horse, then led it down creek from the station. He put a good quarter of a mile behind him before mounting and swinging away in a wide circle toward the east. He rode until his sense of distance and direction told him that just ahead lay those two bald buttes and the broken, rocky country that the supply wagon had circled to. He left his horse and went forward on foot.

He got into the broken country and could see the bulk of the buttes looming against the stars, black and lonely. His caution redoubled until he was just a low crouched shadow, flitting ahead from one piece of cover to the next. And always those lonely buttes loomed higher and closer.

So thin as to be almost an illusion a faint glow took form and a gust of inner exultation warmed Burk Stanley against the growing bitterness of the night. Winter, he thought, was not far away. But, more important, neither was that glow. He traced it down, crept silently up on it and presently was close enough to see and understand. A tiny fire and, crouched beside it, beaked features machiavellian in the ruddy light, was Nick Spade. From time to time he fed the fire with a handful of twigs. Aside from this he just sat silent, waiting.

So abruptly and silently as to send a prickle of feeling up Burk Stanley's spine, a White Knife warrior was across the fire from Spade. Then another and another, until a full score was there. Spade's only reaction was to heap more wood on the fire, until it began to leap and crackle and its glow spread, a glow that built up a glitter in the wild, black eyes of the White Knives.

A warrior stepped out ahead of his fellows and began to speak, in a guttural dialect. Spade answered him in kind. Then Spade stood up and seemed to walk right into the dark side of one of the buttes. He was quickly back, to lay an armful of rifles on the ground by the fire. He made other trips and brought more, until there must have been two dozen of the weapons.

He made another trip and returned with two large, earthen-ware jugs. Before he stopped, there were eight of the jugs.

A stir had gone through the White Knives. The rifles they had viewed stolidly. But sight of the jugs of whiskey sent an avid flame through them. Spade, straightening up from the final load, said something. The lead warrior jerked his head and one of his fellows stepped forth carrying a buckskin sack, obviously heavy. As it dropped at Spade's feet it gave off a metallic chink.

Every inch of Nick Spade's face reflected predatory greed as he loosed the draw string of the sack, plunged his hand into it. The breathless and motionless Burk Stanley saw yellow coins glint in the firelight, heard them clink with the solid, round fullness which only gold coin could give off. Nick Spade reached for his saddle bags and began counting and transferring the coins.

Burk Stanley had seen enough. Foot by foot he wriggled backward, lithe and silent. The glow of the fire had dwindled to just that same illusory hint before he got fully to his feet and sped back to his horse. Burk's face was as cold as the glinting stars as he rode back to Sandy Creek.

How was that as Pawnee Jack Crouch had put it? A five-wagon Conestoga train cleaned out—could see what was left as he drove by, and there wasn't much—women and kids, what was left of them . . . !

And now Nick Spade turning over rifles and whiskey to the White Knives and getting gold, heavy gold in return!

Something almost like physical sickness drew at Burk's throat. He had seen much of death, back in those savage days of Gettysburg, of the wilderness, of the days before Richmond, when he had marched and fought as a member of the Army of Virginia. But that had been fighting between men, armies, between a lost cause and a winning one. But this sort of thing, out here in the vast and lonely plains—. *Women and kids—what was left of them . . .*

Burk was in his blankets and still, though not asleep when Nick Spade came in. And lying there beneath his blankets, Burk found his fists clenched and his body tense and straining with a cold hatred.

THE MORNING was raw and cold and along the mountains far to the north lay a pale dusting of snow. Out at the corral, Burk Stanley and Barney App and Silent John worked fast at their chores to get warm. Murmured Barney softly, "You made little noise going, and little on coming back last night, younker. But you went. And what did you find?"

Burk told them what he'd seen take place beside that tiny fire over by the bald buttes. He told them of the tracks the supply wagon had made, swinging off the regular road to pass near the buttes. Barney spat harshly.

"That Tusco Haartz is surely a foul whelp, fit kind to be doin' dirty work for Spade. He hauled in those guns and that whiskey so Spade could trade for that gold, gold stained with the blood of innocent, helpless folk. Understand, I'm not blaming the Injuns over much. 'Tis their nature to be cruel and vengeful and they know no different. And all this was their country once and it is the nature of any man, red or white, to fight for what he thinks is his. No, I'm not blaming the White Knives over much. But it is the likes of Spade and Haartz, that make them worse than they'd naturally be. Whiskey—it drives an Injun crazy. And furnishing them with guns—pah!" Barney spat again.

"It was evidence the younker was looking for, and it is evidence that he found," said Silent John. "And if it is in his mind to go after Spade now, then we will help him, eh, Barney?"

"Gladly," growled Barney, "gladly! Whenever you say so, younker. No doubt Stinger Denton and Tusco Haartz will side with him, but they'll amount to little."

"In that case," said Burk Stanley quietly, "now is as good a time as any."

They started to climb out of the corral, but stopped there. For that west-bound stage, which had pulled out some little time before, now had hove into view, pounding back to the station at a gallop. Sound of its wild approach brought Nick Spade into the open, brought Stinger Denton and Tusco Haartz, frowsy and bleary and disheveled. Burk and the two old timers ran over to join them as the stage came to a wild, skidding halt. The

off leader of the team was ready to drop, blood welling from a bullet hole in its flank. The driver, Abe Stent, had a bullet gouge along the angle of his jaw and the blood from it fanned redly down his corded throat. The door of the stage slammed open and a passenger fell limply through it, a bullet hole where one eye had been. The other passengers trampled the dead man unheedingly as they leaped and crowded in their fear and anxiety to reach the shelter of the station.

"Injuns! White Knives!" yelled Abe Stent. "They've jumped a wagon train right where our road joins the main trace. We bumped right into it and some of those varmints started after us. There's hell afoot out yonder and there's women and kids in that train. I'm gettin' me a spare gun and I'm going back. Who's going with me?"

"Here!" rapped Silent John.

"And me," roared Barney App.

"We all are," cried Burk Stanley.

"I'll git you that extra weapon, Abe," called Barney, hurrying for the station door. "Denton — Haartz, wake up and move, you drunken fools. There's women and kids out there needin' our help!"

Nick Spade threw up a long arm. "Hold it—hold it!" he shouted. "We can't leave this station unguarded. The varmints may decide to come this way. We got women folks of our own to guard. And we'd most likely be too late to do any good, anyhow. We'll stay here and look after our own."

That gaunt, tired woman in calico stepped from the station. "Melisse and me can look after ourselves," she cried. "You've no need to stay on our account, Nick Spade. If you're half a man, you'll go."

She turned on Stinger Denton, her head high, her eyes full of fire. "You'll be going too, Sam Denton. You've never been a real man in your life before—but you'll be one now—you'll go, or I'll be shut of you forever. You hear me!"

Stinger Denton snarled sullenly. "I'll do what Nick Spade orders me to do, no more. He's the boss of this station."

"And I say no man here will go chasing off crazy-like and get his scalp lifted for no use," said Spade. "I'm boss here, and what I say goes."

"Like hell!" spat Abe Stent. "You're not talkin' for me, Spade. Gimme that gun, Barney, and I'm drivin' back—alone if I have to."

"You'll be needin' another off wheeler, Abe," said Silent John. "This 'un's got a slug in it and is ready to drop. I'll help you hook in a fresh bronc and then we'll go."

Silent swung around on Nick Spade. "Once before there were folks needin' us, and you held us from going, Nick Spade. But not this time—not this time."

"You'll do as I order," snarled Spade, "or . . . !"

He took a step forward, stopped there, for Burk Stanley was facing him, and once again that Dragoon Colt gun of Burk's was bearing steadily on Spade's body.

"You're not giving orders any more, Spade," rapped Burk coldly. "I am. You're going—we're all going. Get your hands up—quick! Quick, I say!"

Nick Spade, his face a mask of malevolent hell, lifted his hands in little, jerky movements. He had them just even with his shoulders when, fast as a striking snake, he leaped forward, slapping out and down to drive Burk Stanley's gun aside.

BURK could have shot him, had such been his purpose. Instead, he flicked the gun aside, then snapped it up and in. The heavy barrel thocked solidly against Nick Spade's neck, just under his ear. Spade went down in a heap.

Burk spun to face the dumbfounded Stinger Denton and Tusco Haartz. "Boost him up to the top of the stage," he rapped. "Boost him up and tie him there. Tie him tight. Tight! You hear me? He goes along. Quick, you two! We haven't got forever."

Spade had a revolver and a knife tucked into that gaudy sash of his. Burk Stanley took these and watched Denton and Haartz struggle to get Spade's limp figure up to the top of the stage. But they managed it finally and when they had spread eagled him there, tying wrists and ankles to the guard rails, Burk climbed up and tested the knots.

Silent John and Abe Stent, bringing a fresh leader from the corral, soon had it hitched in place of the wounded horse.

"You'll get inside and do your damndest," Burk told Stinger Denton and Tusco Haartz, "or you'll never live to see another day." He tossed Spade's knife and revolver down to Barney App. "Take these, Barney, and use them on these two whelps unless they do their stuff. You and John ride inside with them. I'll ride the box with Abe Stent. Give me two of those rifles."

Abe Stent climbed to his seat, gathered his reins, kicked off the brake. The stage swung, lurching. Then it raced away and Burk, throwing a last glance back, saw the gaunt woman and the curly-headed girl watching them from the station door.

VI

THERE WERE gallant fighters in that seven-wagon Conestoga train, forted so desperately out there on the plain. Against Indians with bow and arrow, even in overwhelming force, they could have more than held their own. But these Indians were White Knives, and instead of bow and arrow, they were driving whistling rifle lead into those wagons. Already many of the oxen were down and the White Knives were galloping the deadly surround-circle, always pulling that ominous ring tighter and tighter. Here and there a warrior was down, or a pony, but the others of the circle closed up the gaps, venting their ferocity in gobbled war whoops.

At the reins of the straining, galloping stage team, Abe Stent did not hesitate. He sent the lurching, swaying stage straight at that speeding circle in headlong charge. A small group of White Knives cut out of the circle, sped racing to meet the stage.

Abe Stent knew what he was doing. He rode the brake, set back on the reins and brought the stage around to a skidding halt, broadside to the oncoming warriors.

"Lather 'em!" he yelled. "Burn 'em! Give 'em hell!"

And snatching up his Henry rifle, Abe began to shoot. A burst of fire came from inside the stage. Up beside Abe Stent, Burk Stanley pulled down with cold purpose, cut two warriors from their mounts, dropped the pony of a third. Abe Stent roared like a berserk lion as he got a White Knife and between them, Barney App and Silent John, and perhaps either Stinger Denton or Tusco Haartz, got three more.

Cut to rags, the charge broke and the few survivors scattered in wild dismay. And then Abe Stent was lashing his team to a gallop once more and speeding in straight for the savage circle.

Long after, beside lonely campfires along the trace, men told the story of Abe Stent and his stage, and of the fighting men it carried. And it was a story worth telling. For Abe Stent handled stage and team at once like a mad man and a supreme master of the reins.

He brought the outfit whirling into the circle of racing White Knives on a sweeping curve and he smashed that circle to bits, crashing into luckless ponies, bowling them and their shrieking savage riders over, crushing them under hoof and wheel. And while Abe roared and drove, Henry rifles spat and spat again.

It wasn't warfare as the Indian knew it. It was a man and a stage and a team of four gone completely mad and berserk. And always the deadly rifles of the men that stage carried, spat and snarled and took red toll.

A man came out of that stage. He came out headlong, rolling over and over on the ground. It was Tusco Haartz and he came out of the stage because he was craven and a coward and he had groveled underfoot. And Silent John had grabbed him in contempt and disgust and thrown him out.

Haartz found his feet and started to run, blindly. Out of the dust came a warrior, low crouched over the neck of his speeding pony. A war axe flashed briefly up and down and Tusco Haartz, gibbering his terror, came to fitting end, then and there. A moment later the warrior who had swung the axe, was caught over the sights of Burk Stanley's reeking rifle and died swiftly, also.

A thin cheer lifted from the gallant little wagon train. On the far side of it a White Knife chieftain died, shot through and through with a heavy buffalo rifle. A wailing lifted from savage throats, replacing the gobbled war whoops, the wail of defeat. And then the surviving White Knives were gone, fleeing in rout, utter and complete.

Abe Stent brought his foaming team to a halt. "Barney—John!" called down Burk Stanley. "What's the score with you?"

Barney App stuck his grizzled head out, the fighting snarl of a grim old wolf still on his face. "Me and John are all right. Stinger Denton is dead. He got it early. You saw what happened to Haartz, the useless rat. He wouldn't fight, so John threw him out. You and Abe?"

"Not a scratch."

"What's that runnin' down your wrist?" growled Abe Stent. "Looks like blood to me."

It was blood, and now Burk was conscious for the first time of pain. A bullet had cut clean through the heavy part of his left forearm, missing the bone. He grinned tightly at Abe Stent. "Then I'm a liar. Call it one scratch."

THE GAUNT WOMAN, the curly-headed girl and the fearful stage passengers were waiting when they drew up again before the station. Burk Staniey nodded to Barney App and said softly, "You tell her, Barney."

Barney, grimmed with dust and powder-smoke, went slowly over, met the woman's glance and hesitated. The woman understood without Barney saying a word. Her expression did not change. She said emotionlessly, "All that matters is — did he fight, as he should?"

Barney nodded. "He fought—and in a good cause."

"Then," said the woman, "I am content."

Abe Stent gestured toward Nick Spade. "Untie your skunk and get it off my stage, younker. I got a section to drive and connections to make. Barney—John—I'm needing a fresh team of horses." He jerked his head toward his former passengers and tried to keep the scorn from his voice. "Tell 'em it's further to go back than it is to go ahead. And that one bunch of White Knive Injuns, what's left of 'em, will never want to see a stage again, long as they live."

Nick Spade climbed sullenly down from the top of the stage. He was battered and bruised from the wild ride, his wrists and ankles raw from the knotted ropes. A pallor lay under the darkness of his skin and his eyes were shifty.

"The air," said Abe Stent pointedly, "breathes better up here, now."

Behind a fresh team of six, Abe Stent and his bullet-pocked stage pulled out and the passengers went with it, fearful of going, but more fearful of staying. On the side of the gulch above Sandy Creek, Barney App and Silent John dug a grave and Stinger Denton was buried there. The gaunt woman stood for a time beside the grave, then went stoically back to her work. She saw Barney App adjusting a clumsy bandage on Burk Stanley's forearm and she said to Burk, gravely and kindly, "Come here."

The girl, big-eyed and silent, helped her. They washed the wound clean, bandaged it neatly and when Burk smiled down at the girl, her eyes shut tightly and a tear squeezed out and ran down her soft, brown cheek.

Over on his bunk, tightly bound, lay Nick Spade. Barney App jerked his head that way and growled to Burk, "Well?"

"First," said Burk, "so he'll know that we know—get those saddle bags from under his bunk."

Barney dragged them out, heavy and solid. A shiver ran through Nick Spade, he licked his lips and strained momentarily against his bonds. Barney lifted the saddle bags to the table and emptied them there, a clinking, glittering pile of gold coins. The woman and the girl stared, round-eyed and amazed.

"Only part, eh, Spade?" said Burk Stanley. "A small part. Much more has gone before. Gone to St. Louis. Loot from the wagon trains. Smeared with the blood of decent men, of helpless women and kids. Gone to St. Louis and deposited under your name. Ben Holladay got word of that, and wondered. And sent me out here to find out how and where you got it. I was out by the bald buttes last night, Spade. I saw you and I saw the White Knives. I saw you turn over guns and whiskey to the Indians, saw them give you this gold in return. Well?"

Spade did not answer. He merely licked his lips again, his eyes hot and trapped.

Said Barney App, "The three of us, you and me and John, could hang him just as well as fifty could."

"No, Barney. On the next Eastbound stage, Nick Spade and I go along. I'll

deliver him and the proof to Ben Holladay, who can see to the hanging."

Silent John, alert as usual, head cocked slightly as he listened, said, "Wagon coming." He stepped to the door and looked out. "Big spring wagon and a team of four. Two men."

Burk took a look, stiffened and exclaimed, "Ben Holladay. The big man in the buffalo coat!" Over on the bunk, Nick Spade made a hissing sound.

As the driver brought the equipage to a halt, Ben Holladay jumped down. A massive man, bearded, with flashing eyes, he recognized Burk instantly. "Stanley! Glad to see you, young fellow."

"And I you, Mr. Holladay. This is an unexpected pleasure." They gripped hands.

"Making an inspection tour along the line," boomed Holladay. His eyes narrowed. "Spade, where is he?"

"Come along," said Burk. "I'll show you."

The surprise in Ben Holladay's face as he viewed Nick Spade lying bound, upon the bunk, and measured the pile of gold coin on the table, faded to a bleak sternness. He turned to Burk Stanley.

"Well?" he growled. "Let's have it. Seems I arrived at the right time."

"You did," nodded Burk. And then he told Ben Holladay everything. And, as Ben Holladay listened, his face grew bleaker and more stern by the minute.

"Lies—all lies," spat Nick Spade in desperate thickness. "Stanley's done nothing but cause trouble ever since you sent him out here, Holladay. He's after me, trying to frame me. Lies, I tell you!"

Holladay looked at him. "Then you can explain satisfactorily the gold you've been sending regularly by express to St. Louis, Spade? Or why Scalpknife Station is about the only station on the line that has had virtually no Indian trouble? Or why the most savage Indian attacks on emigrant trains of late have been in this vicinity? No, Spade. I suspected something like this, though nothing quite as bad. And I sent Burk Stanley out here to look into things. It is apparent that he has done what he was sent here for. You're a filthy, murderous, treacherous snake, Spade, and roasting over a slow fire would not be too violent an end for you. As it is, hanging will have to suffice."

"Hah!" exclaimed Silent John.

"Hah!" echoed Barney App. "There's a cottonwood down gulch a spell that is tall and strong enough."

"Then, gentlemen," boomed Ben Holladay ominously, "I see no reason for delay."

Nick Spade snarled and snapped like a trapped wolf as they hauled him away in the spring wagon. At the end there was no swagger, no arrogance, no braggadocio. Nick Spade turned whining and craven, beging for the mercy he had never shown others.

As they swung him off, Burk Stanley was thinking of what Pawnee Jack Crouch had said. *Women and kids—what was left of them . . .*

BURK STANLEY listened gravely to Ben Holladay's proposition. To be the new station master at Scalpknife. "For the winter, I will," Burk agreed. "But come next spring—well, there's a new world out there in the sunset, Mr. Holladay, and it is calling me."

"There is the woman and the girl," went on Burk thoughtfully. "Winter here will be tough on them. If you could find a kindlier spot for them—?"

The woman listened quietly when Holladay spoke of it, then said steadily. "I'll stay this winter here. I'll be content—we both will, the lass and I."

"The girl," argued Ben Holladay. "She deserves better—a bigger chance at life."

The woman met Ben Holladay's glance fully and her tired eyes were soft. "The lass means much to me, Mr. Holladay—well, look yonder."

Ben Holladay looked. And in the pale sunlight, just beyond the station door, Burk Stanley stood, smiling down at the curly-headed girl in buckskins and he was saying something to her, something that held the girl bright and breathless.

Ben Holladay smiled. "Of course—of course! I understand. Madam, I salute your courage and your wisdom."

And to that gaunt, faded woman in calico, Ben Holladay afforded a most courtly bow.

A lean arm slid around his neck, choking off his wind.

DRUMS OF LOYALTY

By De WITT NEWBURY

They throbbed ominously in the forests about the little fort, warning deserter Nate Tucker that his white brothers had beat him, his red brothers had helped him—and vengeance was overdue!

HE CHUCKLED as he stood at the forest's edge and looked across the wide clearing at Fort Detroit. It was a year since he had last seen that square stockade with the red flag flying above the corner bastion, and he could afford to laugh.

Nate shaded his eyes with both hands. He saw the little houses scattered along the river shore, among their gardens and orchards. Cabins of the French Canadians who were British subjects now. He caught a glimpse of the river beyond, blue in the April sunshine. The Indian settlements were out of sight; the Ottawa and Wyandotte villages on the eastern shore, the Pottawattami village behind him to the southwest.

A red-coated sentry was standing at the main gate. Another was pacing the walk over the palisade, his bayonet flashing as he turned at the bastion. Nate stopped chuckling and swore.

He had worn the king's coat himself, a year ago. Now he wore a deerskin shirt, beaded and fringed. And under that he wore a criss-cross of scars on his back.

Nate Tucker remembered it all well enough. He had enlisted in the new Sixtieth Regiment, the Royal Americans, when too young to know his own mind. A frontier catamount too wild for discipline!

The flogging followed naturally. The rest followed naturally, too.

He spat into a bush as recollection grew clear. They had paraded him in the square, bare to the waist, and had tied his wrists to the post. A crowd had surrounded him. Fellow soldiers, fur traders, Canadian settlers, Indians. Sergeant Dunn had stood there, ramrod stiff, giving orders. While the flogger had rolled up his shirt-sleeves and made the cat whistle. Twenty lashes!

Nate remembered the hot taste of bitten lips, the ache of clenched teeth. The slashing, bruising shock of each blow. He hadn't howled, not once.

Then they had cut him loose. Bleeding, half-senseless, he had gathered himself together and jumped at the sergeant.

The big Britisher had fallen flat, an astounded look on his blocky face. His busby had fallen off and his pigtailed head struck the ground with the crack of breaking wood. His gaitered legs had jerked, his eyes rolled up.

Dead with a bursted noggin, Nate had instantly judged. He had leaped across the body and plunged into the crowd. Darting, twisting, knocking an Indian out of his way, tripping a trader. Clutching hands slipped from his blood-wet shoulders.

He had reached the open gate and raced past the sentry, dodging a musket ball. Hurt as he was, he had run with all his limber-legged speed. He had crossed the open and dived into the forest. Yes, at almost the exact spot where he was standing this minute!

Weak and weaving on his feet, he hadn't stopped. He had made straight for the bark lodge of his friend Ninivay.

The old Pottawattami chief had known what to do. He and his squaw had pulled a skin shirt over Nate's raw back, covered his legs with a robe. They had loosened his black hair, painted his face and put a pipe in his hand.

The soldiers had ransacked the woods and all the Indian houses. A detail had come poking into Ninivay's lodge; Nate had sat calmly smoking while they looked around and went out.

He chuckled again, thinking of that. If they'd failed to recognize him then, he was safe now. He had grown leaner, his whole skin had weathered to swarthy brown. His hair was longer. As for his beard, it had hardly begun to sprout yet, and he kept it well scraped.

For a year he had lived with his adopted father. First in a lake-shore fishing camp, later in the winter hunting grounds to the west. With spring they had moved eastward again. It was time for men to begin fishing, for women to plant corn.

The morning sun rose higher, and he strained his eyes. An officer had appeared at the gate with a sashed Canadian. Captain Campbell, his old company commander? No, this man was too tall and thin. It was Major Gladwin himself, with the interpreter La Butte. Gladwin, who had ordered him whipped.

Nate had scarcely realized his hunger to see a white face, a friendly face. He turned away with an empty feeling in his stomach. If he entered the fort again it would be as a blanketed, greasy savage, selling beaver skins.

Well, he'd find friendly red faces in the village. He'd fill that emptiness with an Indian breakfast. A bowl of boiled hominy sprinkled with maple sugar.

THERE WAS an unusual stir in the Pottawattami town. Nate had never seen so many of the nation gathered at that summer camp before. More than a hundred round-topped bark lodges were crowded in the clearing, and women were setting up others along the margin of the woods.

Old men and warriors were sitting in their doorways, each with a trade mirror in his hand. They were daubing themselves with paint, knotting feathers into their hair. A dozen young men were

stamping and shuffling in a circle. They were tricked out in all their finery; in shirts stiff with beading or dyed porcupine quills, fringed clouts and leggings.

One — Kinibic, the Rattlesnake — had tied hawk-bells at his knees. He tossed a stone club in the air and caught it as he danced.

They were getting ready for a feast or high jinks of some sort, Nate judged. Indians were great for such foolery. It was partly their religion, partly their fondness for showing off. The thought of war never entered his head.

He threaded his way between the crowded huts, greeting a friend here and there, to the chief's house.

Ninivay's lodge stood in the place of honor near the council house. That was a big building, its sides and arched roof made of bent poles covered by slabs of bark. It would hold a hundred men.

The chief was smoking by his outdoor fire. He was wearing his best jacket, a gold-laced blue one that had been given to him by the French years ago. There were white circles around his eyes, alternate stripes of soot and yellow ochre on his seamed cheeks.

He said nothing for a while, and Nate could not ask questions. But after his wife had unslung the iron kettle and Nate had eaten his share of mush, the old man spoke between puffs of smoke.

"My son, there is to be a great council of the nations. Though you did not know, all our elders have received wampum belts and messages."

He was silent. Nate lit his own pipe with an ember from the fire. "I am listening, my father," he said.

The chief went on. "This morning the criers came through our town. Pontiac, sachem and war-chief of all the Ottawas, calls us to a meeting."

Silence again. Both blew smoke in the air, staring before them. Until Ninivay made a grunting sound.

"The meeting will be held in our council house, because it is the best and biggest in all the towns. Now you, my son, will not take part, as you are young and were once an Englishman. Yet your white blood has been washed away in the water of our river. Your skin has turned red, and your heart is surely red. You will be one of the guards who stand outside the council house."

This was an honor, Nate knew, a sign of confidence. He nodded slowly.

The chief nodded too, smoke rising in a cloud around his feathered head. "If you are kept in ignorance, it is for your own good. You will know everything soon. And then remember that you are my son, who has eaten out of my kettle, drunk from my turtle-shell, and become a Pottawattami!"

Nate was a little curious, not at all worried. He still had no notion what trouble was brewing. But he suddenly glanced over his shoulder—by chance or because he heard the tinkle of hawk-bells.

A man had paused behind him. A narrow-faced, lithe-bodied young fellow in gaudy clothing. Kinibic was glaring at him with beady, unwinking snake eyes.

THE CHIEFS began to assemble in early afternoon. Nate watched them come, stalking solemnly between rows of awed women and children. He was standing by the council house with the group of young men assigned to guard it.

First to arrive were the Ojibways from the north; Wasson, Sehokas and thirty followers. Tall men with clay-smeared faces. They wore their winter caps of bear, wolf and wolverine skin, fur robes hanging over their arms. Slung bows and quivers, belted hatchets.

They went straight to the council house, where Ninivay waited with his Pottawattamis.

Hours passed by, and then came the Wyandottes from across the river. Nate recognized the chief Takee and counted sixteen others. They were as tall as the Ojibways; stalwart savages in shirts of painted trade cloth. Their faces were streaked with vermilion, white lead and yellow ochre; their scalp-locks bristled with feathers.

The array of weapons made him wonder. Knives and tomahawks, stone mauls and spiked clubs. Half of them carried guns, a couple even had French swords.

The Ottawas came just as the sun was setting. No less than forty, wrapped in bright blankets and every one with a musket cradled in his arms. They were sinewy rather than big. And their heads were un-

shaved, the lank hair either loose or braided.

Only the leader was burly. A man of middle height and middle age, with wide shoulders and a face carved out of brown rock. Nate had seen Pontiac before, but never so closely. Now he stared as a youngster should at a great chief.

A main masterful fellow, by all accounts. The son of an Ottawa father and an Ojibway mother. A fellow who had started from nothing much, and had made himself master of all the Lake Tribes. As far west as the Dacotahs and as far east as the Iroquois!

He'd gained his power through sheer grit and brains. Though of course he was head of the *Metai,* the Magic Makers, and that had helped.

Pontiac looked neither to right nor left. He strode to the council house and stooped through the skin-flapped doorway. His men followed in single file.

A great commotion started among the village women. They ran to the fires, seized the steaming kettles of venison, dragged them to the door and passed them in. Nate fell back to his station. He was to guard the back of the house; together with Kinibic, the Rattlesnake.

The sunset light slowly faded. There would be a feast before the council. Indians never hurried about such business.

At last a column of smoke rose from the chimney-hole, dark against the night sky. The council fire had been lit. A rumble of speech sounded beyond the bark wall. Ninivay was welcoming his guests. A long pause, and another voice began. A harsh, vibrant voice. Pontiac was speaking.

Nate's eyes had fastened on a streak of light, firelight shining through a crack in the bark wall. As he looked at it, Kinibic moved past him stealthily, widened the crack with his fingers and peered through.

That was too much for Nate. He crept up beside the Rattlesnake.

He was looking over the heads of seated chiefs and warriors, at the great chief. Pontiac was standing between the fire and a black-painted post. The light played on his broad chin and cheek bones, marked with vermilion stripes. It made his eyes glitter.

"Brothers!" he was saying. "You have already received my belts, and have agreed with me. We see plainly that the English mean to destroy us, to take our lands and push us into the lakes and rivers. The French—you all know this—were friends who came among us with our consent. They treated us like men and gave us many gifts. The English are enemies who come against our will. They treat us like dogs and give us little.

"Brothers! We have decided that our only course is to eat up these red-coated foes before they eat us. Many nations will help. The Miamis, Shawanoes, Delawares, even the Senecas. It is for us to begin, and our part I tell you now.

"I will choose sixty of my best warriors. We will take the files which the French sold us for making iron arrow heads, and we will cut our muskets short. On the seventh day of next month, the Moon of Planting, we will hide our short muskets under our blankets. We will go to Fort Detroit and demand a council with the chief Gladwin.

"Knowing nothing, he will not refuse. He will foolishly admit us. When we are in the council house I will offer him a wampum belt, but instead of giving it I will hurl it to the ground. Then each of us will snatch out his hidden musket. We will shoot every Englishman there, run out of the house and shoot again.

"The other men of our four nations must be gathered outside the fort. When they hear the guns they must raise the scalp-yell and rush in. We will take all the English by surprise, shoot them, stick our hatchets in their heads, knock out their brains with our clubs!"

THE Ottawa chief stopped speaking. There was silence, not even the sound of breathing. Until he held up his hands and the firelight shone on a red wampum belt and a red-painted hatchet.

The Bloody Belt and the War Hatchet! The first he gave to the nearest man, the second he dropped to the floor.

The belt was passed from man to man. Takee, the Wyandotte, caught up the hatchet. He screamed like a panther and struck it into the black post.

At this all the rest bounced to their feet, howling their loudest. The smoky

room was full of capering figures, bare uplifted arms and waving weapons. Nate fell back from the cracked wall. His ears were ringing and his mind was numb.

HE SAT before the lodge, smoking his pipe and pretending not to notice the activity around him. The whetting of knives and hatchets, stringing of bows, overhauling of guns. The young men were dancing again, yelping as they postured. The sullen drums throbbed in the air.

Old Ninivay was busy on the other side of the doorway. Three times he had painted his face, and each time had wiped the colors off, dissatisfied, and started afresh.

Nate smoked on stolidly. Outwardly unmoved, but sick enough inside.

For days—ever since the council—he had been in torment. He had felt as if pulled two ways, as if his very heart were splitting.

He was the old chief's son, a Pottawattami. He had been ceremonially bathed in the *Riviere Rouge*, the Red River, to wash his white blood away. The red men had accepted him as their own.

White men had flogged him.

But perhaps the flogging was deserved, he thought. Maybe it was part of a soldier's life; just as the sweat-house, fasting and purging were parts of an Indian's life, meant to drive out the wickedness.

Besides, the men in the fort weren't all floggers. Most of them were good lads. Captain Campbell was liked and respected by everybody. He had tried to get Nate out of trouble. And the Major was a fine officer, though strict.

Even Sergeant Dunn had't been so bad when off duty. When unbelted and unbuttoned, with a mug in his fist. Sergeant Dunn, the man Nate had killed . . .

At any rate, his mind was made up. It took more than river water to wash the white from your soul! Even though it meant betraying his adopted father and kindred—even though it meant punishment as a deserter and murderer—he was going to warn the fort.

How? That was the puzzle.

Nate was being watched. Evidently the Pottawattamis were not too sure of him. One or two of the young men were always at his heels, sometimes pretending friendliness, sometimes simply dogging him. Even now Kinibic was loitering near by instead of dancing. And they watched the lodge at night.

Nate knew he mustn't rouse suspicion. They'd tie him up in that case, and Ninivay would say it was for his own good. He had waited until the last day. He couldn't wait any longer. He must give them the slip somehow and get to Fort Detroit.

Even if the whites were ready for it, he thought, there'd be a mortal tug. He began to reckon the odds.

The garrison, rank and file, would number less than a hundred and fifty. Provincials like himself, stiffened by a few British veterans like Sergeant Dunn. There were forty or so fur traders and their helpers as well, a seasoned lot.

They'd have to fight off a swarm! Three hundred Ottawa warriors, perhaps. Twice as many Ojibways. Over a hundred Pottawattamis, and upwards of fifty Wyandottes.

Of course, the English had plenty of stores, plenty of powder and bullets, They had four cannon, a light piece on each bastion. And the two schooners would be anchored before the water gate; each had a crew of eight or ten and four small guns. Yes, with luck the fort would hold out.

Abruptly Nate's mind shifted from the future to the present. He did not look up, merely knocked the ashes from his pipe and refilled it from his marten-skin pouch. Kinibic had squatted beside him.

The Rattlesnake spoke in a guttural murmur. "Brother, have you ever killed a man?"

Nate thought of Dunn and shook his head. "Not in battle."

"Neither have I. I have dreamed my dream and found a name, yet have never taken a scalp."

One of those long Indian silences followed. Nate leaned to the smoldering fire to light his pipe, and Kinibic made a whirring sound in imitation of his namesake.

"Brother, I have been thinking of the Englishman who lives alone on the island, *Isle-au-Cochon* the French call it, above the fort."

Nate remembered the man. Fisher, a

discharged soldier who had built a cabin on the island. "What is your thought?" he asked cautiously.

"That we become warriors, you and I! Let us take a canoe tonight and paddle up river to Isle-au-Cochon. We will kill the Englishman and take his hair. The first to strike shall have his scalp, but the other shall taste his blood. So we may both win honor."

Nate smoked and said nothing. The Rattlesnake bent sidewise to peer at him with glinting little eyes. "Do this," he said, "and I shall know that you are indeed a Pottawattami!"

So it was to be a test as well as an exploit. Perhaps Ninivay himself had planned it! Nate must be careful about refusing, he knew. "Will we not be acting too soon?" he muttered. "Will we not alarm the English?"

Kinibic grinned, his painted face creasing. "The other English will not know. We will beat the Ottawas—they will take the scalp if we do not. We will take it tonight, and be back at Fort Detroit for the fighting tomorrow!"

Nate saw the answer to his problem. He could leave the village with Kinibic; then, in the darkness, he would manage to slip away. Fisher must be saved if possible. The important thing was to save the fort.

He puffed smoke and grunted from his belly, just like an Indian.

IT WAS easy enough to creep out of the lodge. Ninivay and his old wife were soundly asleep, or pretending to be. Nate felt that split in his heart as he crawled under the door-flap. Likely he was leaving his adopted parents for good.

And it was easy to get clear of the village. Kinibic was waiting for him in the shadows. Together they stole among the huts, noiseless in their moccasins. Both were stripped for war, greased and painted.

Nate had an impulse to run as they reached the shore. The Rattlesnake was at his elbow, though, a hot hand on his shoulder. Those snake eyes could see in the dark! Better to wait, he decided, until they were well up stream, then swim for it.

They righted one of the upturned canoes and found paddles. The only sound was a light scrape as they pushed the birch-bark shell away. Then they were out on the misty river, dipping the paddles.

A half-moon rose slowly over the eastern shore. A breeze sprang up and the mist shredded away. They paddled steadily, Nate at the bow. No need for caution. The English suspected nothing, no sentry would give them a second glance.

The Wyandotte village was quiet. But a glow shone above the trees, far ahead and to the right, and the mutter of drums came on the wind. The Ottawas were awake, dancing around their fires.

Nate heard a few homely farm sounds as they passed the Canadian houses. A dog barking, a horse stamping in some barn, a calf bawling hungrily. Now he made out Fort Detroit, a dark mass on the left, with the two schooners lying before it.

They were almost abreast of the fort. Kinibic began a low chant, keeping time by thumping his paddle against the side. Nate felt his muscles tighten. In another minute he would pull out his knife and slash the bark bottom. Then he would roll overside and dive.

He wasn't quick enough—and there was other treachery afoot that night. Kinibic's song ended in a whirring rattle, the canoe rocked and shifted. A lean arm slid around Nate's neck, choking off his wind.

He was dragged backward and looked up to see the moonlight glinting on a knife. And two snake eyes!

The Rattlesnake hissed. "I know your heart is still white, Englishman! You made fools of Ninivay and the rest, not me! Yours is the first scalp I shall take!"

Nate had no time to use a weapon. He flung his knees up, and they struck Kinibic's forehead. A violent blow. The canoe tipped, spilling both grappling men into the water.

They rolled over and over, clinging together. Nate was not ready for the plunge. His nose, ears and mouth filled as he fought in the icy flow, his head whirled as he went down. He rolled up again, though, still fighting.

He found himself breast to breast with Kinibic, treading water. He had the Indian's knife hand tightly gripped in his left, his own right wrist was held as

firmly. He kicked; and Kinibic floated length-wise, so his moccasins only scraped the Rattlesnake's long body.

They splashed and wallowed, each trying to break the other's hold. Nate clamped his fingers tighter on the thin, slippery wrist, wrenched his right arm. No use! Kinibic's grip was like coiled wire. He saw the Indian shake the wet hair back from his paint-smeared face and grin in the moonlight. He felt two lean legs lock around his own.

That was the game, he thought. To pull him down and drown him. Good enough! Two could play at that. He gulped a long breath before he went under.

Down, down again, turning and twisting. The water was cold down there. It was utterly dark, too, and there was no sound but the gurgle in his ears.

A long time seemed to pass. His ears were hurting now, flashes of fire were stabbing his eyes. His lungs struggling as if to burst his ribs. He let out a little breath and felt it bubble past his head.

They sank deeper. Was there no bottom? No earth or sky any more? Suddenly Kinibic unlocked his legs, began to wriggle and thrash. Nate held on grimly. He felt the squirming body grow still, the arm he held grow limp, the grip of the other hand loosen.

He went shooting up then. A long way up. He almost thought he was drowned too, and this was his soul rising! He knew better when he shot out into moonlight and clean air.

Everything was strangely peaceful. He looked at the sleeping shore as he floated and gasped, the glimmering, sliding water. He saw the half-filled canoe drifting down stream. And then, three yards away, a black head broke the surface.

Kinibic had fooled him!

The two floated face to face. Kinibic had lost the knife, but still had the hatchet. He reared up in the water, breast high, and sent it spinning and flashing.

Nate rolled on his side, the hatchet struck close and sank without a splash. The Rattlesnake had swirled away and was swimming for the canoe. Escaping to hunt the settler in Isle-au-Cochon! Nate went after him with a reaching overhand stroke.

The Indian swam low in the water, like an otter—or a snake. He changed his course as Nate surged near, making for the eastern shore. That was a mistake. Nate cut across with a rush and clutched a handful of floating hair.

He took two handfuls. He doubled, planted both feet on Kinibic's slippery back and tugged with all his might. There was a crack, the crack of a breaking neck bone.

Kinibic went writhing away with the current. A dying snake. Nate turned and headed up for the fort.

A WATCHMAN had been roused on one of the schooners. A lantern was dangled overside and a voice bawled, "Halloa there? What's the rumpus?" Another voice called from the shore, "Who goes?"

Nate answered the sentry at the water gate. "A friend!" He stood up in the shallows and shook the water from his oiled body.

The sentry stumped forward, his musket at the port. "Rat me, a savage! What d'ye want at this time o' night?"

Nate grunted. Caution told him to act the savage, for a while at least. "I have news for your chief," he said boldly. "Why do you keep me waiting?"

"Here's impudence!" The sentry laughed. "You've a thirst for a dram of rum, more likely. But you speak pretty good English." He pushed open the unbarred gate and bellowed, "Corporal of the Guard!"

The corporal came with a lantern, held it up to Nate's paint-blotched face. Nate knew both men well enough, yet neither gave any sign of recognition. "He's a messenger from one of the upper posts," the sentry guessed.

"Well," the corporal decided, "I suppose the Guard Officer had better see him. This way, you."

Nate padded behind in his wet moccasins. Down the short street, past the council house and the officers' quarters. Across the square, bordered by barracks and cabins. His heart sank as he crossed that square, the place where he had taken his flogging. He was here again, an outcast from his red friends. What would he be to the whites?

They reached the log guardhouse by the

main gate, went into a bare candle-lit room. Nate's heart lifted just a little. An officer was dozing on a bench, and the officer was Captain Campbell.

The corporal saluted. "An Indian, sir. Says he has a message."

The captain roused, yawning, glancing up carelessly. Nate stood still and straight. Campbell reached for the candle. He rose and came close, a queer look on his ruddy Scotch face. His mouth pursed for a whistle.

"Captain!" Nate muttered. "I was plumb obliged to bring the news. The worst sort of news! I must speak to Major Gladwin, right soon!"

Campbell set the candle down and rubbed his grizzled, unpowdered head. "Ay, lad," he whispered. "It must be dom bad to bring ye back. Corporal, a file of men here! I think we'll e'en wake up the Major."

The soldiers took Nate's knife and hatchet from his belt. They fell in on either side, the captain marching ahead...

Major Gladwin was up and awake in short order, stepping briskly into his office. A tall, slender man with a keen face. He had pulled on breeches and boots, but had not taken time for a coat or wig. His cropped hair shone yellow in the candle light.

He laid a pistol on the rough table and seated himself. "Where's La Butte?" he asked impatiently.

"No need for the interpreter," Campbell answered, "Nor for the guard, either. Wait outside, you men. Now, Major, take a look at this mon."

The major looked and said, "Ha!" noncommittally.

"Do ye not know him, sir? It's Tucker, the lad who has been missing for a solid year."

Gladwin put both hands flat on the table and leaned back. "Ha!" he said again. "The mutineer and deserter. How was he caught?"

"Whatever he's done," Campbell sighed, "no doubt he'll pay for it. He returned of his own accord, sir, and has something to tell you. I believe it may be important."

Nate told his story in a rush. The major listened with a slight frown. He did not interrupt or ask questions, and when it was over he turned to Campbell.

"A strange tale! I know the Indians have been discontented, yet I can hardly conceive that things have gone so far. This fellow is a renegade. He may have concocted a pack of lies to curry favor."

"Oh, but Major!"

"We will take precautions, of course. Meanwhile," he spoke to Nate directly, "there are heavy charges against you, Tucker. Desertion! Also insubordination and assaulting a superior. Sergeant Dunn lay unconscious for eight hours."

"Then sat up," Campbell broke in, "and called for a can of rum."

Gladwin went on, unheeding. "The sergeant recovered and you have returned to duty. There may be something in your story. However, you cannot hope to escape due penalties."

Nate straightened. He didn't care about penalties, not at the moment. Dunn had lived, and he was no murderer! "Let it be shooting or hanging, sir," he said. "No more flogging."

Major Gladwin rose. "We shall see. A military court must settle the entire matter. Recall the guard, Captain. The prisoner remains in close confinement for the present. For the future— we shall see, we shall see."

IN A FEW minutes Nate found himself back in the guardhouse. Only now he was in a log-walled cell. He gripped the bars of the slitted window and listened.

A rattle of drums began. Honest soldier drums, not the muttering Indian sort. Then shouting of orders, stamping of feet and bobbing of lanterns. The garrison was being called to arms. The outer sentries were being withdrawn, the gates barred, the palisades manned.

He grinned to himself, there in the dark. Whatever happened to him, the fort had been warned in time.

And what would happen in the morning, when Pontiac came with his sixty warriors? Woud they be greeted with a volley? Or admitted and made prisoners? He laughed aloud. The great Ottawa chief might be his cell-mate tomorrow!

He dozed for a while, propped in a corner, and was up again at dawn. Nobody bothered to bring him food, but he pulled his belt tighter and stuck to his window. He could see the main gate and even look

across the square to the council house.

A red-coated squad was lined up on either side of the gate. The rest of the troops were paraded in the square, fully equipped. Drums and fifes in the center, on each flank a knot of traders—hard, whiskered fellows—armed with long rifles.

He heard the news by scraps as the nearest group passed it along. Savages were thronging the outer common in scores and hundreds, as if for a ball game. Now a sentry on the northern bastion reported canoes passing over from the Ottawa town. Now a band of feathered, blanketed warriors was filing along the river road. And now Pontiac was at the gate.

Nate saw Major Gladwin saunter up in full dress, with the interpreter, Captain Campbell and Lieutenant McDougal. The gate swung open.

Indians poured through in a stream of plumes, paint and gaudy blankets. The two squads presented arms, the five drums and five fifes struck up a rousing march. The gate was shut and barred.

Pontiac halted opposite the guardhouse. for just an instant his mask of stolidity slipped. He gave a throaty growl and darted a quick glance right and left. Then he turned his hot stare on Gladwin.

"Why," he demanded, "do I see so many of my father's young men here with their guns?"

La Butte put the question into English, and the major smiled sardonically. "I have ordered them out," he answered, "to do my son honor. Also for discipline and exercise."

"Why is your door shut behind me?"

"So that our council may not suffer interruption."

The column moved on, Pontiac and the officers leading. The Indian faces were expressionless, turned straight ahead. But beady eyes shifted to and fro, from the shining bayonets to the primed and cocked rifles. Brown hands clutched the blankets tighter. Blankets that covered hidden arms.

They crossed the square and filed into the council house.

Nate pressed close to his window and waited. He didn't know what to expect. A burst of gunshots from the squat, closed building, then the gobbling scalp-yell? A mêlée filling the fort, and a red wave surging over the walls? Gladwin surely was a cool hand to risk that council!

The soldiers remained in formation. Except for a detachment under McDougal; this began to drill before the council house, with snapping commands, clumping boots and thudding musket butts. The drums rattled and boomed, the fifes shrilled.

Nothing else happened. An hour dragged by, another.

Finally the door opened and one by one the blanket-wrapped men stalked out. Still hiding their shortened guns! Gladwin had outfaced them. They hadn't dared to act, knowing that the fort was ready.

Pontiac couldn't hide his bafflement, though, or his fury. His forehead was knotted, his rocky face set in a grimace. And every dark face behind him was troubled and gloomy. Would they be taken? Or shot down as they crossed the square?

Neither. They hurried to the gate, it creaked wide and they went streaming out. Glad enough to get away, Nate judged! He understood. Major Gladwin wouldn't break the peace first. If war started, it would be no fault of the white men.

He pulled his belt tighter and sat down against the log wall. Let them hang or shoot him, even flog him. He had done his best.

THREE DAYS later he stood on the platform near the north bastion. He was wearing the king's coat again and held a musket. Bullets were thumping into the palisade, Indian yelps were sounding from every side.

The red crew had failed in their surprise, but they had declared war just the same. The Ottawas had scalped Fisher on the island, after all, as well as several other outlying settlers. Now they were besieging Fort Detroit.

Nate had been taken to Campbell's quarters on the second night. The captain had issued uniform and arms, ordered him to keep quiet about his adventures. He was still a soldier of the Sixtieth; every man was needed for defense.

He poked his musket through a loophole and fired. A troublesome lot of Wyandottes had taken shelter in a French barn

and were shooting between the chinks. The owner of the building was standing in his farmyard, shaking his bushy head helplessly. Canadians were not being harmed; they had no part in this war.

Nate's shot plunked into a log. Yells of derision answered it. Powder smoke spouted from every chink in the barn, lead slapped the palisade and hummed over his head. A flying splinter stung his cheek. He wiped a trickle of blood away with a knuckle.

As he reloaded he called toward the bastion, "Hey, gunners, look alive there! What ails ye? Can't you give yon shed a blasting?"

"We'll do that!" a shout came back. "We'll send them a warm one!"

The little gun roared tremendously and belched a load of red-hot spikes. They crashed into the barn. In a minute more it had burst into crackling flames, the naked rascals scuttling out like bugs from under an upturned stone. Nate knocked one yelper head over heels as he bounded off.

It was finished for the time. And as soon as the excitement of action died down, worry began to rankle.

Nate was in an awkward way, the uncertainty weighting more and more heavily on his mind. He was a prisoner on parole, with a court martial hanging over him. Law of the British Army! Nobody could get around that.

And there was no use pretending. He really did care a good deal about penalties. Whether rope or firing squad, or another slaughtering dose of the cat-o-nine-tails.

BOOTED FEET were clattering on the ladder, mounting to the platform. He finished loading, then turned his head. Captain Campbell was beside him— with Sergeant Dunn.

Dunn, as large as life, with his bulldog chops and his stiff pigtail sticking out behind!

He spoke in his old bullying tone. "The Captain has told me about you, Tucker. It's to be a secret, as Major Gladwin wishes to keep the savages mystified as to how he found them out. Dammy, you were an unruly dog, and you near broke my knob for me." His hard muzzle cracked in a grin. "But here's my fist!"

Nate gripped the beefy hand.

Campbell's expression was stern, except for the Scotch smile in his crinkled eyes. "I've a word for ye, lad," he said. "There will be no court. The assault charge has been dropped, Dunn consenting. And ye didn't desert; ye've been on detached service, as observer among the Indians. The Major has proved it by writing a report to the Commander in Chief, Sir Jeffrey Amherst."

He nodded and the two passed on down the platform. Nate turned back to his loophole. He was feeling better. Not entirely satisfied but a lot better.

He was a soldier again with a clear record. "Observer" meant "spy" in plain talk, and spying was nasty work. Yet that was exactly what he had done. Well, if it was to be kept dark, perhaps Ninivay would never know and grieve about it.

The chief was too old for fighting. The Pottawattamis didn't seem so bloodthirsty as the others, and Nate wouldn't shoot any if he could help it.

He'd shoot the other red rapscallions, though. He'd help to hold Fort Detroit until relief came, and afterwards serve out his time honestly. He'd do his duty and obey all orders.

At any rate, there would be no more flogging!

An Indian bobbed from behind a bush, far out on the common, to caper and hoot. An Ottawa by his long hair and drooping feather. Nate shoved his musket through the loophole and sighted carefully.

FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINES A Fiction House Magazine FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINES

REBEL'S RETURN

By M. HOWARD LANE

Swaggering carpetbaggers smirked and fingered worn gun-butts when Jebb Colony rode into town. What had they to fear from one of J. E. B. Stuart's disbanded cavalry?

HE WAS COMING BACK to South Texas now, to San Patricio county and home, with the dust of war on his boots, and gray in hair that hadn't been there three years ago when he'd left to join Jeb Stuart and his cavalry.

His own name was Jebb—Jebb Colony; and it had seemed fitting that he should enlist with Stuart and his reckless riders, for their given names matched one another and certainly their spirits were tuned to the same cause.

That cause had been lost to the blue hordes from the North, and there were times at night while the silence was strong when he could remember all the shot and shell that had been spent. And he would wonder if the fighting had been worthwhile, if Yankee and Confederate blood wasn't much the same beneath white skin. The Lord knew he had seen enough of it spilled

Jebb smashed spurs into Trumpet and lifted the Rebel yell.

and some, of course, had been his own. But he was whole again now, a tall, slat-thin man, with wide shoulders and the grace of a born horseman. He could thank the Almighty for his health, Jebb Colony reflected, for there were many Texans wending a slow way home to their native counties, who had lost an arm or leg.

He was heading toward Pioneer now, and the feel of San Patricio sod was springy beneath the hooves of Trumpet, his big gray cavalry horse. No more would he wake in the dawn to the call of bugles, Jebb thought, for he was on his way home to the arms of his sweetheart, the embrace of his mother, and the hard handshake of his father. It was mighty fine to contemplate.

Trumpet seemed to think so, too. He stepped lively along the white road beneath the shadowing oaks, remembering no doubt the wide pastures that had been his on their Sandusky Hills rancho not many miles beyond Pioneer.

Jebb had, he reflected, been about twenty-seven when he'd left Pioneer. Now he was close on thirty-one, but the gray in his hair wouldn't matter so much to Melody Martin. A man needed years on his shoulders to make him a proper husband.

He crested a gentle ridge, and the oak-speckled range rolled out before him to the adobe and white frame buildings of Pioneer nestling snugly in a little bowl where the Sandusky Hills flung out prongs like the curves of a tall steer's horns.

Excitement jumped along his nerves, but he controlled the urge to loose the reins and let Trumpet run. That was not his idea of coming home. A man should not show his impatience, nor his desire. The greater glory lay in acting as though nothing had changed, for–even now he could feel the hate and the smell of cannon smoke still draining from him.

Returning to this town where he had been born was wonderful, but the pleasure was something he would keep to himself, Jebb decided. He touched his thick, graying hair and remmbered how he had anticipated this home-coming on many a night when the cannons had been muttering in the distance and a man had not known whether he would be alive in the morning. But all that was finished and in the past now.

The future lay ahead, bright and clear as a new dollar minted in Washington. He and his dad would gather a herd of Bar-None longhorns and make a drive north to Kansas where they were clamoring for Texas steers to stock their ranges. When they returned with hard money jingling in their pockets, he would wed Melody, and they would raise young Colonys who could live out their lives in peace. It was all a man could desire.

He had heard talk, of course, but certainly it could be nothing but rumor. There were returning veterans who said that Texas land and cattle would be valueless for years to come. Reconstruction, he had heard it called. Carpetbaggers from the victorious North were moving in on a defeated South, demanding lands and cattle and allegiance.

But this was something hard to believe. After all, both Yankees and Confederates were American, and there was a Governor and a Legislature sitting in Austin who were anxious to bring justice to all good Texans.

"Personally," Jebb spoke his thoughts aloud, "I'm tired of war," and he touched the long Navy Colt on his hip, wondering if he should put it in his saddle-bags. But he decided against that. A man wouldn't feel dressed without a gun on his hip.

Jebb reached up and smoothed his gray hair, for Pioneer lay close ahead now, and if his folks had received his last letter they and Melody would be waiting at the Potter House.

"Goin' to be mighty nice!" Jebb muttered, and he knew that was an understatement.

HE RODE into the foot of Conega Street, and saw that the shade trees arching over the board walks had grown measurably in three years. But they didn't seem as green, and picket fences were not as white and neat as he'd remembered. Neither were the gabled houses behind them. Once they had been all spick and span, but now the winds and snows of winter and the hot sun of summer had dulled the paint, and everything looked dingy and forlorn.

Jebb felt his long, thin nose wrinkle in something close to distaste, and then he wondered if he'd gone away with a dream

in his mind instead of reality. That was it, he guessed.

On ahead lay Conega, lay the business district. Pop Tuttle's Livery loomed on the left. Once, and he was sure of this, the big barn had been freshly whitewashed, but now it was gray—as drab as the old man who pushed himself laboriously from a chair alongside the big open door. He put a hand above his eyes, staring at the lone rider who came joggling into town, and then Jebb saw the old Texan's glance shuttle up-street where a few people moved lazily along the boardwalks.

THERE was a furtiveness in Tuttle's actions that he had never noticed before. "Pop!" Jebb called to the first friend he'd met on this, his return.

"Not so loud!" Pop Tuttle's creaky voice reached him across the white dust of the street. "Mosey on inside, Colony, as though yuh didn't know me."

Jebb blinked, and it was the hard sunlight that made his eyes squint. He felt tight all over, suddenly. There was something wrong with this town—his town! He twiched the reins, and Trumpet moved obligingly toward the shadowy coolness of the livery and the smell of hay and grain that touched his nostrils.

Tuttle followed him inside, moving with short, crab-like steps. The hand he reached up to grip Jebb's knee was crooked with rheumatism, but his grip was still strong. His eyes searched Jebb's thin, unsmiling face, and then he nodded.

"You're the man we've been looking for," he said with satisfactoin. "You've got a gun on your hip, and I'd say you've had plenty of chance to use it."

"I have," Jebb said, "but I don't aim to draw it again."

Pop Tuttle grinned crookedly. "Mebbe ye'll change your mind son," his voice dropped, and his manner softened. "I might as well be the one to tell you. Your Mom and Pop are dead. Fever took your Mom, and Wayne, your dad, followed her in a few days. We buried 'em on the Bar-None, underneath an oak near the house. There warn't no way to get aholt of you—"

"None," Jebb said and his mouth felt dry. He stared unseeingly at the stable wall, thinking that Wayne Colony would never accompany him to Kansas with a Bar-None herd. Death had destroyed that plan, but it would not alter his own intention once he could gather a herd and a few neighborhood boys to drive it North.

Pop Tuttle was talking on, as though to dull the first shock by giving him something even grimmer to think about, and Jebb caught the words unbelievingly.

"Melody Martin," Tuttle was saying. "I hate to tell you this, son, but she's turned ag'in ye. Traffickin' with that carpet-bag devil, Ed Block. He's got his eye on the Bar-None. Wants it for his own. Figgers he'll take it for taxes, and win Melody to boot."

"Only now I'm here to stop him," Jebb said softly.

"You're the man we've been lookin' for," Pop Tuttle repeated. "This town needs a leader. Ed Block moved in here as County Administrator right after the War, and he brought a carpet-bag crew with him. Named his own man Sheriff, and put in his own Judge. He's got the deck stacked his way, and folks are danged near scared to breathe."

Jebb thought of the battle-fields he had left behind him, and of the talk he'd heard concerning Reconstruction. If this was a sample, he wanted none of it.

"Block won't get the Bar-None," Jebb said. "But he can have Melody, if that is what she wants!"

He had not bothered to dismount, and now he started to turn Trumpet in the runway, but Tuttle's old hand rose to grip his knee. "Wait," he said, "I ain't finished yet. Ye'd best climb down and stay with me. Some of our old pards have been here of night, discussin' ways and means of getting rid of Block and his carpet-baggers. The Patriarch Patriots, that's what we call ourselves, and mebbe you can help us."

"I'll see you tonight—"

"Wait," Tuttle cautioned. "There's one more thing. Burn Cadwell. He's Block's sheriff, and he don't like strangers—"

Jebb's lips turned in a mirthless smile as he studied Tuttle. "Colonys helped build this town," he said quietly. "We ain't exactly in the 'stranger' class."

"Which is just the trouble," Tuttle said grimly. "Once the word gets around that you've come home Ed Block's killers will be at your heels. Ye'll never see the Bar-

None again if they have their way about it—"

"I'll—" Jebb started to speak, and then he saw a shadow darken the doorway.

A man tall as himself, and as thin, shambled into the runway. The dimness could not hide the glint of the silver star pinned to the newcomer's vest.

This was Burn Cadwell, Jebb thought with a peculiar distant interest for none of the things he'd heard seemed quite real yet. It was too much for a man only recently returned from the nation's battlefields to assimilate.

Cadwell's jaw was angular and moved rythmically on a cud of tobacco. Juice stained the thin, wide mustache that shaped his upper lip beneath a beaked nose. His eyes were the color of pale stone and as expressionless. He shambled toward them and his long arms were thumb-hooked in crossed gunbelts.

"Gents, howdy," he drawled, and his eyes were roving over Trumpet, noting the signs of long travel on the big gray horse.

Jebb watched his gaze settle on the single Bar that marked Trumpet's withers, and his muscles grew taut, as they had when he'd ridden into battle.

"You're Colony," the sheriff said with certainty. "I've heard talk of this big gray devil, and a man named Jebb who rode off to win a War—and helped lose it!"

"Some of the enemy," Jebb said, "were honorable"

II

HE KNEW the sheriff was deliberately needling him, for a man on horseback could never draw as quick as one balanced on foot. He thought suddenly of Jeb Stuart and the cavalryman's ability to strike when least expected. He also thought of Pop Tuttle's talk of a meeting this night of his Patriarchs who needed a leader to help put fear in carpet-baggers' hearts.

"The only good Rebels are dead," Cadwell snapped. "So get out of town, Colony, and stay out!"

Jebb shook his head. "Not today," he said, "nor tomorrow. This is my home, Cadwell, and I'm here to stay!"

He touched Trumpet with blunt rowels and the gray lurched forward. Cadwell's hands fumbled toward his Colts, but surprise spoiled his draw. He had expected defense, not attack.

Trumpet's shod hoof smashed against the sheriff's instep, and his pumping shoulder caught the big man squarely in the face, flinging him aside into a stall support. Cadwell crumpled to the plank floor, blood pouring from his nose.

Jebb brought Trumpet to a halt, and his voice was like iron as he looked down at the unconscious lawman. "Put him in a stall," he said. "He's one damn Yankee who won't spoil my homecoming!"

Pop Tuttle stared up at Colony like a man viewing light for the first time. "Lord," he said, "I never hoped to see this day. Son, you've started things rolling, and I guess it'll be up to us to keep 'em on the move."

Jebb nodded with a thin smile and eased Trumpet's reins. The big gray stepped decorously into the first shadows of afternoon. Jebb turned up Conega toward the square bulk of the Potter House, and he wondered what he would find there. Not his father and mother, that much he knew. But Melody might be in the hotel, and he felt his nerves grow taut at the thought. She was giving her smiles to Ed Block now—which was something still hard to comprehend.

"Mebbe we'll put a stop to that!" Jebb thought, but he knew force wouldn't win back the girl to whom he had given his heart. He made himself quit thinking of her, for Pioneer and all this San Patricio country was more important than either of them. Freedom was needed here. A decent Administration that might point the way to a better plan for governing all the conquered Confederacy. But peace would never come until the Yankee brood roosting here were gone—or dead.

His eye noted a stir of excitement past the bulk of the Potter House. There the solid red brick of the County Courthouse rose in two-storied grandeur. The big oaken doors were open, and Jebb noticed that most of the loiterers along the street were looking toward them.

He heard one man say to another in the silence that had descended over Conega Street, "Here comes that damn carpet-bagger and some of his bunch. Five o'clock and fust drink time for them."

"Not fer Block," the other answered.

"He'll be meetin' that Martin wench at the Potter House..."

The words were hard to swallow, but Jebb Colony rode Trumpet straight ahead, and the lines etching his mouth deepened.

Ed Block was wearing tight-fitting, fawn-hued breeches. He carried a black ebony stick, the gold head of it catching the rays of the fading sun. His shirt was white, his string tie black, and his vest was a violent plaid. A tall gray beaver cocked rakishly over his forehead. He and the pair with him angled across street toward the Potter House. One of the men wore snug-fitting range garb, and twin Colts sagged at his hips. The other was garbed in clawhammer coat and striped breeches, and Jebb guessed that he was probably Judge Gore. So these men were Melody's new friends. His lips curled, but he could not condemn the girl before seeing her.

He swung into the hitchrack before the hotel as Block and his henchmen reached the board walk. Jebb felt their eyes touch him as he swung down and moved to put his body against Trumpet's withers shielding any sight they might have of the brand the big horse wore.

A snatch of their conversation reached him. "Where's Cadwell?" Block asked. "He should be here—"

"Perhaps," the smooth tones of the one Jebb took for the Judge rumbled, "he is trying to earn his pay by finding out where and when that bunch of local Rebels meet. If he does," the man's voice dropped, "I assure you they will get together no more."

Block's chuckle was soft as a cat's purr. "That's fine talk, Gore."

The Yankee's meaning was obvious. Jebb felt his blood grow hot. There could be no justice with a man like that on the bench. He raised his head as he finished tethering Trumpet and ducked beneath the hitch rail, and his eyes looked straight at Melody Martin. She had come from the hotel to meet Ed Block on the wide verandah, a tall, slender girl, garbed all in white, and her cheeks as she looked down at this man who had returned, flamed, then paled.

Jebb Colony, watching carefully from the boardwalk, saw her glance turn to Block. "Ed," she murmured, "please go on in with your friends today. I—I don't feel like taking our usual stroll..."

Jebb ducked his head and started up the steps, intending to dodge this foursome, but Block turned after a look at the girl and stepped solidly in front of him. The man's face was heavy, clean-shaven, arrogant. His eyes were like small hard bits of blued steel.

"Look up, Texas man," he said heavily. "Why should a woman's cheeks change color after looking at you?"

JEBB drew a deep breath, and his face was mahogany smooth as he looked at the carpet-bagger. "Why, mister," he answered, "mebbe it's because I'm so handsome..."

The words had crawled out of their own accord and he saw Block's face turn angry. The hands of the gun-hung henchman started to drop toward their belts.

Death joined them on the verandah, waiting patiently to see who might be the first to die. But time had not run out for any of them just yet, for Melody Martin was moving, putting herself casually between the gunmen and Jebb Colony. Her hand reached out toward the glowering Block.

"Eddie," she said cooly, "I like my men jealous, but not kill-crazy. Judge Gore, why don't you and Mr. Petras join us? Perhaps a little fresh air will do you all good after such a long hot day in that stuffy old courthouse."

Melody had not forgotten him! Her talk was telling Jebb as plainly as though she'd spoken the words that her interest in Block was feigned. She was playing the man like an angler drawing in a hooked trout.

The Yankee glowered up at him. "I'll see you again, Texas man," he promised coldly.

Jebb watched the quartette move down the steps, and he saw Block's eyes study Trumpet at the hitch-rail, and the tell-tale bar that branded him. The man hesitated, and his eyes turned studyingly to the tall, serene-faced girl beside him; then they moved on along the boardwalk, and the shadows of afternoon were filled with a sudden chill.

Melody Martin was in as much danger as he, himself, Jebb realized, for Block had identified Trumpet, and he would guess now why the girl's cheeks had

flamed at sight of him. Under his breath, Jebb cursed. He had never guessed that a home-coming could be fraught with so much danger, and he knew grimly that he would be a dead man before morning if Block could manage it.

The thought brought a surging battle recklessness into him again. "Root hog or die," Jebb muttered, and he tramped into the remembered lobby of the Potter house.

White-haired Ezra Stone, the clerk, peered at him from behind the counter, and his mouth opened as though to greet him, and then Jebb saw the man's eyes swerve about the big lobby to idly placed chairs, and he noted that a lounging stranger occupied each of them. There were five of the men and the brass of cartridges glinted in their belts. They were carpet-baggers. A Texas man could almost tell them by the smell.

BOOTS struck the door-sill behind him, and Jebb heard a dry voice say, "Colony, you're over-due in Hell—"

Jebb cursed himself for not suspecting that Petras might double back, and then he saw old Ezra Stone rise from behind his counter with a double-barreled shotgun in his arms.

"Too old for war," he chanted, "but not too old tuh kill me a damn Yankee—"

Jebb leaped sidewise as the shotgun lifted, and his long legs pushed him toward a rear hall that opened beside the clerk's counter.

He heard a Colt crack, and felt the breath of the slug sweep past his cheek, then the huge roar of Stone's shotgun shook the lobby, and even the sound of his own Navy Colt was dull in Jebb's ears as he snapped a shot at one of the gunnies stationed in the lobby. The man flinched and settled back in his chair, clutching a spurting arm, but there were still four of them, and their guns started beating as they lurched to their feet.

Lead drove Stone back against his cash drawer, and death cut short the rebel yell on his old lips. One glance across his shoulder as he reached the rear hall showed Jebb the bloody heap of Petras slumped on the lobby floor. Gunsmoke wreathed him like a cloud—a war-cloud gathering over Pioneer.

Yankee lead tried to tag him and Jebb found the cry of Stuart's Cavalry raw on his lips as he whirled and made his run down the hall. Pounding feet followed him as Block's men tried to close in.

A side door opened, and a panic-stricken face peered out. Jebb shoved the roomer aside and leaped into the room. "Bolt that door," he snapped, "and if you aim to keep livin' get outside after me—"

Without waiting to see whether he was obeyed, Jebb leaped toward the open window across the room. He dove through it and lit on palms and one shoulder in the alley beyond. Rolling like a tumbler, he gained his feet, and whirled back the way he had come. There was the slim chance those Yankee gunnies would figure he'd holed up in the room, and spend time trying to smoke him out. If they did he might be lucky and reach Trumpet. The big horse was worn from long travel, but there was still speed left in his slim legs.

He reached the edge of the verandah and cursed the knot of townsmen already gathered in the doorway. The sound of gunfire had drawn them like honey attracting bees. And upstreet toward the Courthouse, he made out the shapes of Judge Gore and Ed Block running toward him. Trumpet snorted, head high, and Jebb jerked the tie-rope free, and lifted to leather.

Townsmen scattered from the hotel door as the flying wedge of Block's gunmen reached the verandah. Deliberately, Jebb raised his Colt, and fired one shot. He saw a man trip and sprawl forward, and then his long-shanked spurs touched Trumpet's flanks.

"Time for us to go, big fella," he said softly, "but we'll be back to stay!"

Block was yelling savagely up-street. "Cadwell! Where in the Hell's that sheriff—"

Bent low over Trumpet's withers, Jebb grinned. Ed Block was going to have to get along without his sheriff. Pop Tuttle was standing out in front of his Livery as Jebb swept past, and the old-timer lifted his arms and gripped his hands over his head enthusiastically.

Jebb raced on without appearing to see the gesture, and he wished that the stableman had showed more caution. Block's carpetbag gunnies were following him, and one of them might have noticed that gesture and start drawing conclusions.

Then there was no more time for thought. It was ride, and ride fast and pray that the twilight would change soon to darkness.

III

OAKS MADE hump-backed shadows across the plain, and Jebb swerved to keep them constantly between himself and his pursuers, for one lucky bullet might cut him down, and this was not the time to die. Melody and countless others would suffer if he did. If this flare-up of violence did not gain Texans the freedom war's-end had promised, Block's control would squeeze the life from all of Pioneer and its citizens.

Tonight might tell the tale, Jebb thought bleakly, and he watched darkness settle like a merciful blanket over the prairie. He was miles from Pioneer now, and a glance across his shoulder showed him pursuit was far behind.

Smiling thinly to himself, he gentled Trumpet and rode the big gray beneath the low-spreading limbs of a wide oak. Quiet in his saddle, he heard hooves rush near, and a man's voice cry: "We'll never catch that Johnny Reb in the dark. He rode with Stuart, I hear tell, and that outfit knew all the tricks. The best we can do is get back to town and report to Block and Cadwell—"

"We're shet of the cuss, anyway," another said. "He'll head for the border."

The first speaker said acidly, "An' now you're guessin', Neely. Jeb Stuart was a fox, and so's this jigger. Mebbe he's headin' for the border, and mebbe he ain't."

"He'll never show his face in Pioneer again," a third speaker broke in. "Judge Gore will plaster a fat bounty on his head before morning..."

Block's men drifted off, and Jebb sat still in his saddle, waiting impatiently for the sound of their mounts to fade. He had a ride to make, but it would not be toward the border.

The Sandusky Hills loomed like a dark, broken wave against the lighter shine of the evening sky to westward, and they would be his goal once Block's gun-wolves got beyond hearing distance. Safety, and a chance to think out the problems that beset Pioneer, might be waiting on the Bar-None. Old One-eye Hank Swan, the ranch cook, was probably still there even if the rest of the crew had drifted after the death of his mother and father. Hank could get word of his whereabouts to Pop Tuttle, and perhaps Melody. Together they'd have to try to figure out a way to drive Block from San Patricio county—or leave themselves.

"And that we're not fixin' to do," Jebb muttered.

He let Trumpet drift from the cover of the oaks, and the night was a cloak to shield him, as, gradually, he let the big horse run, swinging in a wide circle about Pioneer.

The lights of the town glowed like fireballs on an Autumn evening, and Jebb felt a curse that he could not hold back rumble in his chest. This was one hell of a homecoming for a soldier!

The prairie flowed beneath Trumpet's hooves, and the Sandusky Hills seemed to reach out like a pair of giant arms to enfold the rebel homecomer. Man and horse at last rode onto Bar-None range, familiar short-grass hills studded with oaks, and boulders and brush. Longhorns disturbed by Trumpet's run crashed away into the darkness, and Jebb listened to them with an appreciative ear.

"One of these days," he promised the steers, "you'll be wearin' the Colony road-brand and headin' for Kansas..." But that would have to wait until Pioneer, and all its citizens were free again.

"Includin' me!" Jebb thought, and he felt his pulse quicken. Through the darkness ahead, he saw one brave light burning. The Bar-None. Home. It was a word only a man long gone to War could fully appreciate. He pressed spurs into Trumpet's flanks, and the big cavalry horse gave up his last reserve of speed, as the corrals and barns took shape before them. The light was glowing in the big ranchhouse kitchen, and Jebb swung down as the back door opened.

A tall, slat-thin man longed in the opening, a carbine tucked in the crook of his arm. The white patch that covered one eyeless socket only seemed to sharpen the brilliance of Hank Swan's other orb.

Light from the lamp on the table behind him cast a glow over Colony as he swung his dusty length down from saddle. "Don't

go takin' a pot shot at me, Hank," he drawled.

"Jebb!" the cook howled. "Glory be to Sam Houston, iffen it ain't all of ye in the flesh. Come in, boy, and set while I warm up the beans and throw a steak in the pan. We can talk while I mix the biscuits—"

It was the kind of reception he'd counted on getting here at the Bar-None, only he'd expected to find it from his mother and father, and for a moment his eyes strayed silently toward a big oak on a knoll to one side of the house. There would be two mounds beneath it now, for that was where his parents had long since decided they'd rest. He wondered a little grimly how soon he might join them.

One-eye Hank Swan had swarmed down from the steps and was pawing him like an affectionate hound-dog, gabbling all the while. "Shore bad about yore folks, boy, but I dunno as they're the lucky ones at that, way things are goin' around here. 'Course I don't think all Texas is bin' administered as bad as our county. The Legislature up at Austin is doin' its best to run out the carpet-baggers and get things straightened around, but they cain't do everything tuh once. Meantime that cussed Ed Block and Jedge Gore are runnin' Pioneer to suit theirselves. Hear tell, they're tryin' to get their hands on our Bar-None—but now you're back—"

"And going to fight!" Jebb said flatly. His grin was thin. "I got the habit ridin' with Stuart."

"We'll whip 'em," One-eye Hank Swan said confidently as he led the way back in the warm kitchen. "Hell, one good Texican is wuth two dozen No'then carpet-baggers!"

"You're sure about that?" a sardonic voice asked from the doorway that led into the dark hall beyond the kitchen.

JEBB COLONY saw gunsteel glint as a Colt lifted, and he stiffened himself for the expected impact of lead.

But the bullet did not come. Ed Block came side-stepping into the room, elegant in his fawn breeches, and a short, gray jacket. His Colt was black against the whiteness of his shirt, and the muzzle did not waver from the tall Rebel's belly.

Burn Cadwell stepped wide to the other side of the door, and there were twin guns in his hands, menacing both of them. A dry, waspish smile lifted one corner of his tobacco-stained mustache. He spat on the clean kitchen floor, and his slate eyes held Jebb.

"I told yuh to get out of town and stay out, Johnny Reb," he said flatly.

"I'm out of town," Jebb parried, and he was thinking fast, remembering old Pop Tuttle's hands clasped above his head when he had spurred out of Pioneer with Block's gunsters after him. One of them had likely surmised the significance of the gesture, and on their return to Pioneer, they'd managed to free the sheriff. But what had happened to Pop Tuttle—and the little band of loyal Texans who had been meeting secretly in his Livery?

There were other men tromping into the kitchen now, men covered with the same dust that layered Jebb Colony's clothes. One of them grinned and glanced at Block.

"I told you this cuss was a fox. Stuart never knew when he was licked, and neither does this cuss. I had a hunch he'd come doublin' back to this ranch of his'n."

"And a good hunch it was," Ed Block nodded his black head approvingly. "Remind me to boost your pay, Snade."

The man called Snade grinned. "Why on that thar basis, chief, I'll even tie the knot tuh hang this hombre. One of you boys bring in the rope—"

Hank Swan grunted disgustedly. "This is what a Texican gits for leavin' his doors unlocked!"

"Shuck those Colts, Reb," Sheriff Cadwell said flatly. "They ain't goin' to do you any good in Hell—"

Jebb hesitated, and his glance touched the gleeful Snade. The man was skillfully fashioning a hang-noose in one end of the new yellow rope another of the carpet-bag crew had brought in from the hall. Death was coming either way. But perhaps he could stall this quartette of carpet-baggers until a better chance to make a break came along.

Slowly he unlatched the silver buckle of his gunbelt, and let his Colt snake to the floor about his dusty boots. "You're callin' the cards, Black," he said flatly.

"And doing a good job of it!" the San Patricio County Administrator boasted. "When we get rid of your kind, Pioneer

will be on the way to recovery. A good thing for that Tuttle that he cut the sheriff loose after you tied him up and tossed him in one of his stalls at the Livery. He'd be dead as you're going to be otherwise."

Jebb masked the elation that filled him. Old Pop Tuttle was the foxy one. He had played his hand like a master. The meeting place of the Pioneer Patriots was still inviolate. So, even if he died, that small body of loyal Texans could continue to wage their underground fight against Ed Block and his carpet-baggers.

"They's a nice spreadin' oak out in the front yard," Snade drawled, "and a limb jest made for hangin'." His glance shifted to One-eye Hank Swan. "Don't worry, grandpa," he added. "Yore turn will come after Colony. The rope should be stretched right nice by then."

His long, supple hands moved, and the noose he'd fashioned flipped out, and settled about Jebb Colony's head and neck. "Come on, Reb," he drawled. "Let's get to the hangin'."

Ed Block chuckled. "Melody ain't goin' to like to hear about this, Reb, but she'll git over it. Death allus makes the heart grow fonder for somebody else."

The feel of the hemp was like sandpaper about Jebb's neck as he shrugged. He had seen some cold-blooded killings on the battlefields, but nothing that equalled the attitude of these carpet-baggers. "Hang me, if yuh want," he made one last plea, "but yuh got no cause to string up One-eye. Give him a horse and let him ride. It'll get him out of your territory quick as killin'."

"Somebody's got to do your cookin' in Hell!" One-eye Hank Swan grunted. "Besides these *cabrones* ain't going to listen tuh reason, anyawy."

"He's got more sense than you," Burn Cadwell said. "Let's get this over with." He turned back into the hall, and Snade jerked on the rope about Jebb Colony's neck.

Jebb's fingers itched to throw the loop over his head, and make a last fight, but there were too many naked guns in the room. He was going to his death, but he had gone to his death before, riding with saber high, and a Rebel yell on his lips straight into the bright mouths of flaming cannon. He had lived through that —"and mebbe I'll live through this—" Jebb thought.

Trumpet waited out in front of the house. One of Block's men had brought the big gray around from the back, and Block gestured with one of his Colts.

"Climb aboard, Reb."

They'd run Trumpet out from under him, or so they thought, and Jebb had his first hope. None of these men but himself knew that nothing short of a black powder blast would make the cavalry horse move if he was in the saddle and bade him 'hold'.

Another of the carpetbag crew had fired a lantern, and its sickly light bobbled along in front of Snade, leading Trumpet toward the big oak in the front yard. Beneath the tree it was blacker that a pitch barrel.

Jebb eased his feet in the stirrups, riding light in his saddle. They had bound his hands behind him as he'd stepped outside, and the hemp was rubbing them raw.

One-eye Hank Swan stepped along in front of Ed Block's Colt, and his cursing was a Texan's best. "Shut that up," Block ordered, "or I'll bend my gun over your head, grandpa."

They'd shoot Hank like a cur dog if he tried and make a run for it, Jebb realized, and it was that thought which held him helpless. Somehow he had to create a diversion that would allow the one-eyed cook time to swing up behind his saddle. Together, in the darkness, they'd stand a chance of dodging carpet-bag lead. But time was running short!

Like something visualized in a bad dream, Jebb watched Snade toss his end of the rope over a sturdy limb. The noose beneath his ear was starting to tighten. Jebb smashed his spurs into Trumpet's flanks, and the wild Rebel yell that had led Stuart's cavalry into more than one battle found its way to his lips.

IV

LIKE AN ECHO, an answering cry came from down near the barns! A Rebel war-cry almost drowned in the rumble of many hooves, and for an instant Jebb fancied himself already dead and listening to the remembered rush of Stuart's cavalry across bloody ground. His head jerked, and agony gripped him, then the pressure was gone from the free end of the rope

as Trumpet smashed full into Snade. The carpet-bagger went over backward, screaming hoarsely.

Jebb whirled Trumpet, and he felt certain his eyes were playing tricks on him for the yard was a shambles of rearing horses, and flaming guns. Men ran through the darkness, shouting. A gangly figure came leaping toward him, and Jebb saw the pale glint of a knife in the man's hand.

"Hold 'er, son," One-eye Hank Swan panted. "Goshamighty, I don't know yet what done happened, but she's all to the good. Looks like the hull danged Confederate Army has showed up to save our bacon!"

Jebb felt his arms come free, and the old hot exultation of battle filled his body. Rebel yell on his lips, he swung Trumpet in alongside Snade's fallen body, and leaped from saddle. Flaming guns out in the yard gave enough dim light for him to catch the glint of the carpet-bagger's Colts fallen from his nerveless hands. Snade, Jebb realized grimly, would never get that raise Block had promised him, for the gunster was dead.

Rebel yells, wild as a coyote's howl, marked the dark fighters as the battle swirled and flared across the wide yard. Trumpet vaulted a fallen horse, and a rider came veering in at him. Their guns flamed together, and Jebb felt the wash of lead past his cheek, and then they passed each other, with the other rider swerving in a wide circle toward the barns. Jebb saw dark figures follow the man, and he realized his own bullet had missed the kingpin of them all, Ed Block. The carpetbag Administrator was turning tail, pulling the remnant of his crew with him. Jebb knew better than to follow now.

His own tall figure was recognized, and Pop Tuttle and his Patriarch Patriots gathered about him. "How'd you boys learn what was goin' on out here?" demanded Jebb.

"Hell," spat Pop Tuttle. "We seen Ed Block an' his crew ridin' out this way an' figured whut they was up to. Got here in time to see Snade stringin' yuh up. More sport than scalpin' Comanches," Tuttle commented. "I ain't counted noses yet, but I don't think we lost airy man for keeps. Sam Harper's down with a bullet hole in his laig, but he's cussin' good and strong so I guess he'll live iffen you boys plug up his laig while we foller that pesky carpetbag boss and his crew."

"And get your heads blown off," Jebb said scathingly. "Pop, I figured you for more sense than that. Winnin' one battle ain't enough. The Rebs won a lot of 'em —but lost a War. Block made a run for it tonight because he was outnumbered, and that was smart. But he ain't whipped," Jebb went on earnestly, "and he won't be until he's dead, or a decent Administrator takes his place in the Courthouse.

"That's where some of you gents come in," he let his eyes swing across the faces of men he remembered since boyhood. All of them had been friends of his father— Texans who had fought through the Indian and Mexican Wars to make their State a proud place to live.

In the light of the lanterns some of the men had kindled, Pop Tuttle's brow showed deep furrows. "What you aimin' for us to do?" he asked in perplexed tones.

Jebb drew a deep breath. "I want six of you to make a ride to Austin in the morning. See the Governor and tell him what's been going on here. Yankee or Rebel, if he's the man I think he is, he'll replace this Ed Block with a decent Administrator."

"And what about you?" Tuttle asked.

"Me?" Jebb's lips twisted. "I'll be waiting here with One-eye. There's a heap of tall brush in the Sandusky Hills where I can hide out if Block's sheriff comes riding this way again."

Pop Tuttle shook his head doubtfully. "Your idee is sound as a dollar," he admitted, "but I misdoubt if it will work. Howsomever, she's worth a whirl, and we'll try 'er. Now, I think we better be headin' home. Arnicy is what more'n one of us is goin' to be needin' on our joints. We ain't as young as we wuz."

"But we can shoot jest as straight," one of the oldtimers chuckled, "and 'tween us all we'll tie a can to Block's tail yet—or measure him for a coffin."

Between them, Jebb and Hank carried Sam Harper into the kitchen and bandaged his leg as best they could. Sweat was dripping from all their faces by the time the chore was finished, and Jebb was ready to accept the drink One-eye Hank Swan poured for him.

"You learn a lot of things on the battlefield," he said somberly looking down at Harper's gray face, "and one is to take care of the wounded. Your leg will be all right—"

"I hope everything else is the same," the cook muttered, "but I got my doubts. My glass eye is itchin' me somethin' terrible, and when that happens it means more trouble to come."

They slept turn and turn about throughout the rest of the night, one of them always on watch in front of the house, and Jebb was dozing in the same room where they had lain Harper when a hurried rush of voices in the hall outside roused him.

One-eye Hank Swan was howling, "Why damn 'em, they cain't do that. It's ag'in the law—"

"Ed Block," a girl's voice said wearily, "makes his own laws—"

JEBB rolled his legs off the bed, and reached for his scarred cavalry boots. His heart was thumping, and it wasn't the threat of trouble in the voices outside that made him breathe fast. Melody had come to him. Her voice had been remembered music that he had carried into every battle with him, and he had counted on coming home to peace and a home with her. And they'd realize that goal yet, he promised himself grimly.

Eyes brightening, he met the girl's impetuous rush across the room and for one heady second he felt her lips against his own, and then he realized that her cheeks were wet.

Tears lay in the eyes she turned up to him, angry, distraught tears. "Jebb," she cried, "oh, Jebb. I prayed I'd find you here—"

He held her back a little. "More trouble?" he asked tonelessly.

"Yes," her fingers dug into his arms. "Ed Block's men went through every house in town last night, searched every stable, and when they found a horse that had been ridden, his carpet-baggers arrested the owner. They've got old Pop Tuttle, and a dozen others in their courthouse jail. Judge Gore has charged them with inciting rebellion, and Block has declared martial law. He's posted notices demanding one hundred dollars a day tribute from Pioneer, until you are turned in to him. He—he'll hang you and all the rest!"

Jebb felt his face turning icy as the girl talked. This was Block's answer to men willing to accept war's end, and starting to build a new life on the crumbled ruins of the old.

That was all that any of them had asked, but it had been more than the Administrator had been willing to grant. He thought of his own plan voiced in the yard after Block's carpet-baggers had fled from the Bar-None. A plan that could have brought peace without violence—but all that was in the past now. There'd be no citizens' committee paying the Governor a visit. All the men who might command respect in Austin were jailed—charged with treason!

"Looks like Pioneer would have been better off if I'd never come home," Jebb spoke almost to himself.

"No!" Melody said vehemently. "This trouble was coming anyway."

"You were jest the spark to set off the powder," One-eye Hank Swan growled, "and now she's busted, I'm wonderin' what we can do next."

Jebb lifted his gunbelt from the back of a chair, and latched it about his waist. "Get a saddle on Trumpet," he said softly to the cook, "and I'll show you. I'm ridin' into town."

Melody caught at his arms. "Jebb, you can't. Block's got armed men patrolling the streets. The order's gone out to shoot you on sight!"

Jebb Colony looked at the girl, and his smile was icy, almost impersonal. "Stuart always attacked where and when he was least expected. Block sure ain't goin' to be expectin' a visit from me. If I move fast mebbe I can get inside his Courthouse without getting shot. And if I do one of us won't be coming out alive."

He saw the girl away, and then he watched her straighten proudly. "My prayers brought you back from the fields of death," she said quietly. "God grant they will keep you safe today!"

"You will wait here for me?" Jebb looked down into her face.

Melody nodded wordlessly.

Jebb took her hands. "When I come back," he said gently, "I'll be bringing the Parson with me..."

V

THE SMELL of the hills was fresh and clean as he rode the wagon path toward Pioneer, and Jebb savored the scent of sage and thorn brush. It was clearer and sharper in his nostrils than he had ever remembered it could be. Like all the sights and sounds of a cavalry troop making ready to ride into battle in those long months and years behind him. He had always noticed it then, a quickening of all his perceptions, and he felt the same way now riding toward Pioneer.

He could make out the solid bulk of the Courthouse, and the simple plan of the building was a clear memory in his mind. The jail was in the basement, with broad stairs leading up to the first floor. The Courthouse and County offices were there, with the Judge's chamber and Council Room on the second floor. Block would likely be making his headquarters in Gore's sanctum, Jebb decided.

Trumpet was following a long swale now that would curve and lead him behind the town, and once he was opposite the courthouse, there were alleys he could follow to the rear of the structure.

Jebb left Trumpet safely in the swale he had followed, and with the stealth he had learned on many a front line scouting mission, he reached the out-buildings behind the Courthouse. From here, he could look along the brick side of the building to the door that led into the sheriff's office and jail. There was no guard at the door, but on the main street he saw a sentry with a rifle tucked under his arm walk slowly across the alley opening. Crouched in shadow, he watched the man travel his beat, and he timed his dash for the minute the guard passed from view.

If the jail door was locked, Jebb knew he could never make it back to cover again, but the knob turned freely under his hand. Then suddenly lead chipped brick dust into his face, and he heard a long yell echo the rifle shot at the mouth of the alley.

"Colony!" the sentry howled. "Colony's come to town."

Jebb cursed, and his shoulder smashed the door inward. Some unaccountable impulse had made that sentry turn back before finishing his beat, and now time he'd counted on to favor him was gone in that one quick gun-blast. Across the dim jail office, Jebb saw the hard-faced carpetbag turnkey try and drag his feet from the sheriff's desk. Terror sagged the man's mouth.

"Don'—" the carpet-bagger cried thickly.

"Set still," Jebb rasped, "and you won't get hurt." He fumbled behind his back, getting the door closed and bolted. It would take minutes to batter down the solid oak panel. But it wouldn't take long for Burn Cadwell's crew to sweep down from upstairs, once that sentry sent his cry echoing along the courthouse halls.

There was only one small chance of changing the shape of things now. Jebb swung toward the stairs leading up to the main floor, and he heard Pop Tuttle shout from the cell block "Hang and rattle, son! We're all for Texas—"

For Texas! "Win here," Jebb thought, "and we'll have a different deal in every county."

Shouts were echoing through the corridors when he reached the main floor, and he saw a man running up the stairs toward Judge Gore's chambers.

A carpet-bagger, brandishing a Colt, raced toward him. "Colony's on the loose —" he cried.

"He's downstairs," Jebb said on impulse. "Where'll I find Block?"

"Upstairs with Gore, I guess," the man said.

"Thanks," Jebb nodded, and he mounted toward the second floor at a run. The man who was ahead of him ducked like a rabbit into an open door down the long hall. Jebb drew up at the portal, and lifted his Colt.

He heard a voice cry excitedly, "Ed, the danged sole of my boot come loose, and I turned back afore I finished my regular round and its a danged good thing I did. I spotted Colony getting into the jail—"

"And now Colony is up here where he shouldn't be!" Jebb drawled

HE STEPPED into the judge's sanctum. A bottle of bourbon and glasses rested on Judge Gore's wide desk. Block, wearing tidy black and white sat at one corner of it.

Gore, in his clawhammer coat, lounged in the heavily-padded chair behind the

broad desk. The guard was hunched at the other corner.

They all saw him at once, and froze like three statues. Death lay in Jebb Colony's narrowed eyes, and in the twisted slant of his lips. "Killin'," he said, "is too good for you, Block, and you, Gore. This other feller here, he ain't nothin'. Jest scum, like the rest of your carpet-bag crew. Ain't a one of 'em would stick with you if you couldn't pay their wages—"

Ed Block moved his big hands carefully on the polished surface of the desk. His beefy face looked sick. "You didn't come here to talk, Rebel," he said huskily.

"You're right, I didn't," Jebb nodded. "I was just pointin' out to this *compadre* of yours that come tomorrow him and his pards won't be gittin' no more pay so there won't be much sense in them hangin' around Pioneer — particularly after you turn loose Pop Tuttle and his Patriarchs—"

A strange, thoughtful look crossed the guard's crafty face, and Jebb knew he had planted seeds in the man that might empty this town of carpet-baggers before nightfall.

But it was Ed Block's roar of defiance that drew his chief attention. "This is rebellion! Colony, you're under arrest. You'll hang—"

"No higher than you tried to hang me last night," Jebb drawled. "Now, up on your feet—"

"Wh—what?" Judge Gore began weakly.

There was one man unaccounted for and his absence was sawing at Jebb's nerves. Burn Cadwell was somewhere in this building, and he was not a man to give up without a fight. Time might be playing into the sheriff's hands even now.

"Up!" Jebb thumbed his Colt, and Bourbon geysered over the desk and Judge Gore's white shirt.

The Judge staggered to his feet, pawing at his face, and blubbering curses. Block moved. He rose from his chair, and his black eyes were wicked. "You're dealing, Reb," he said softly.

Jebb stepped to one side, and gestured toward the door. "The first man who makes a break gets killed. Now walk."

He followed the three of them to the head of the stairs, and wildly excited voices whipped up to them. At least two dozen carpet-bag guards and deputies were milling in the lower corridor. They were leaderless. Where was Cadwell?

Tall above Gore and Block, the men below had no trouble recognizing him. One yelled, "There's that Johnny-Reb—"

"In command!" Jebb said. "If a man lifts a gun, Block dies. Turn around and walk out the front door, all of you. Pronto!"

He saw them hesitate, and his Colt prodded Block. "They're your boys," he murmured. "I ain't hankerin' to shoot you, but I will—"

"Take his orders, men," Block said, and the words sounded bitter on his tongue.

Jebb watched them hesitate, then turn and shuffle toward the wide front doors, and that one unanswered question was like a bell tolling in his mind *Where was Cadwell?*

"Down you go," he told the three in front of him. "And you—" his Colt prodded the carpet-bag guard who had brought word of his return to Block and Gore, "follow that brave crew outside, and pull the door shut behind yuh. It'll lock if you give it a good yank."

The guard shrugged hopelessly. "You're the doctor," he mumbled, and his feet quickened as they reached first floor level.

Jebb watched the man leave, and the tall door boomed hollowly behind him. None of that crew would be entering the courthouse again without a battering ram to break down the oaken panels, Jebb thought, and by the time they could accomplish that he and Tuttle's men would be dead or ready to greet them with lead.

"Wh—what—" Judge Gore began again.

"Downstairs," Jebb said. "Don't dally!"

The steps were like a black well with light from the open front doors gone. Dim radiance from a lantern that always burned above the sheriff's desk pooled across the floor below them, and Jebb realized that no one had tried to batter in the outside door through which he had entered. That might mean there was no one down in the basement jail except the frightened turnkey, and Tuttle and his patriarchs. If he could free those oldtimers, and if they could fort up in the courthouse for twenty-four hours the danger would be past. Without their leader, Block's carpet-baggers would leave Pioneer like rats deserting a sinking ship.

Block's boots rang on the basement floor. Gore was a lurching shadow beside the Northerner. Across their shoulders, Jebb made out the gangly shape of the turnkey, standing indecisively beside the barred, cell-block door.

"Open it up," Jebb said flatly, "and walk right in ahead of us. You three oughta enjoy roostin' in your own jail—"

The turnkey's face was shadowed as he turned, but Jebb thought he saw a grin twist the man's slack lips, and then the grill was swinging inward. From somewhere down the dusky corridor, Pop Tuttle's old voice came in a yell.

"Jebb, ye're trapped!"

THE DOOR was open and the jailor threw himself forward, prone on the floor, as a mushroom blast of red flame rocketed out at them. Jebb heard the sickening impact of buckshot rip into Judge Gore and Ed Block. He heard their dull screams through the roar of shotgun fire, and knew in this single instant that he had underestimated Burn Cadwell. The sheriff was playing a lone hand for big stakes —control of San Patricio county. With Block and Gore dead, he could step into the Administrator's seat—and blame the killings on himself and the patriots.

His own Colts were talking as the thoughts crossed his mind, seeking the gangly shape of Cadwell in the jail corridor. The sheriff's weapon shook the basement again, but the muzzle was pointed toward the roof. Again Jebb fired, and the shock of the slug tipped the man on backward. He was going down, hingeing at the knees, and Jebb knew that he was just as dead as the partners he had sent to Hell. The unholy trio were gone, and there'd be no more like them coming from Austin to Administer the affairs of the county. This was a job for Texas men—ready to build a new and prouder state on the foundations of the old.

The turnkey was stirring like a scotched bull rattler. "Get up," Jebb told him, "and finish your chore. This jail needs one prisoner to stay in business—and you're nominated. Howsomever, I think you'll be getting more company after Pop and his Patriarchs start cleanin' up the town—"

Wearily, Jebb's shoulders sagged for a moment as he went down the corridor with the keys to free the Texas men. Then he straightened.

The battle was over. Out in that swale a horse waited for him. And, beyond Trumpet, was Melody.

And life...

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, etc., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933 of FRONTIER STORIES, published quarterly at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1946.

State of New York, County of New York, ss.:

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Malcolm Reiss, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Editor of FRONTIER STORIES, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Fiction House, Inc., 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y.; Editor, Malcolm Reiss, 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y.; Managing Editor, None; Business Manager, T. T. Scott, 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Fiction House, Inc., 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y.; J. G. Scott, 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the cicumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is . . . . . (This information is required from daily publications only.)

(Signed) MALCOLM REISS,
Editor,

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 20th day of September, 1946.

GEORGE G. SCHWENKE,
Notary Public,

(My commission expires March 30, 1948.)

IDAHO!
by WALTER GALLI
THE NAME COMES FROM AN OLD SHOSHONE INDIAN EXPRESSION MEANING, "LOOK, THE SUN IS COMING DOWN THE MOUNTAIN." ...IDAHO WAS ONE OF THE LAST FRONTIERS OF THE UNITED STATES TO BE EXPLORED AND SETTLED. ...IT IS THE ONLY STATE IN THE UNION OVER WHICH THE FLAG OF ANOTHER NATION HAS NEVER FLOWN!!... FULLY ONE-THIRD OF ITS AREA IS STILL A DENSE FOREST--A REMINDER OF WHAT PRACTICALLY THE ENTIRE REGION WAS LIKE WHEN LEWIS AND CLARK ENTERED IT IN 1805. ...IN ITSELF, IT IS AN EMPIRE LARGER THAN ALL OF THE SIX NEW ENGLAND STATES COMBINED!
...the PANHANDLE STATE...
COUR d'ALENE
PIERCE
LEWISTON
ELK CITY
LEMHI
SNAKE RIVER
BOISE
POCATELLO
OREGON TRAIL
THE GREAT SEAL OF THE STATE OF IDAHO
IDAHO WAS ADMITTED TO THE UNION JULY 3, 1890.
BOISE, THE CAPITAL, IS SAID TO HAVE GOTTEN ITS NAME FROM CAPTAIN BONNEVILLE'S EARLY VOYAGEURS WHO JOYFULLY GREETED ITS WOODED SITE BETWEEN DESERT AND MOUNTAIN WITH THE GLAD SHOUT, "VOYEZ LES BOIS!"
POCATELLO--
IDAHO'S SECOND CITY AND PRINCIPAL GATEWAY TO THE NORTHWEST, WAS NAMED AFTER AN INDIAN--WHO, WITH A WAR PARTY BRUTALLY MASSACRED THE MEMBERS OF AN EMIGRANT TRAIN IN 1862.....!

DUEL IN THE DESERT

By EDWARD S. FOX

Trooper Mathew Locke knew he didn't belong in this raw, sun-baked, death-haunted territory, knew they whispered behind his back, "The Colonel's son is yellow!"

"THE ALLAN WAGON is turning back," his father said. "You will accompany it, serving as escort as far as Leavenworth. There you will present Colonel Ames with this letter in which I have enclosed the transfer that will put you under his command until your term of enlistment is up. After that you can do as you please—"

Mathew Locke stood stiffly at attention before the table at which his father was seated. Colonel Locke, a tall, stern-faced man of fifty, was built straight as a ramrod and dressed now in full field uniform, with his pistol strapped to his side and his sword lying ready on the table at his elbow. He'd been a soldier all his life, on Grant's staff in the war recently ended. Before him his father had been a soldier, and his grandfather, and his great grandfather before that.

But beneath his father's matter-of-factness Mathew knew there was bitterness and disappointment so intense he could not bear to look him straight in the eye. His father had expected great things of him, expected him to be a soldier, too, and he'd failed—and now was being sent back east—

"I trust you'll find the study of science more to your liking."

Now there *was* a trace of bitterness in the older man's voice and Mathew flushed, but said nothing. What could he say? That in spite of what every man in his troop, including his father, thought, he was not a coward? That was what they said of him behind his back. It was what some would have told him to his face if he hadn't been the Colonel's son.

As unlike the Colonel as a slim maple is to a sturdy oak, he stood now in that dusty, heat-seared room at Fort Marion on the Scorpion River. He looked slight and boyish—even for his nineteen years—in the plain blue uniform of a cavalry trooper. His face was bronzed and smooth-shaven, his hair blond and long and his features were finely-moulded, from his blue eyes and sensitive mouth to the sharply-pointed, yet determined, chin. His bearing and his physical and mental make-up were not a soldier's—never had been, and never would be. That had been apparent from his very first day on the frontier.

"Is there anything more?" He stared stiffly at the rough wall behind his father.

His father shook his head shortly. "Nothing. Our scouts report that west of here the Indians are preparing to attack the wagon train that passed through the fort a few days ago. You won't have any trouble going east. You'll be safe." His lips curled distastefully on the last three words; then he added heavily, "Be ready to leave in thirty minutes. The Allans are anxious to get started at the earliest possible moment."

Mathew saluted, about-faced and walked quickly from the room. Behind him was silence and he knew that at last his father's glance had lifted to follow him out the door. He could feel its resentment and its disappointment scorching the back of his neck.

FOR a moment he paused on the steps of his father's quarters and seemed to draw himself together as the blast of heat and glare from the hot summer sun struck down on his head and shoulders. It was like a huge oven inside the rectangle formed by the fort's four walls. It was a busy oven, however; busy with the thousand and one preparations of a cavalry troop making ready to go out on a mission.

Before the stables blue-uniformed men were saddling up their horses. In front of the barracks others were packing their bedrolls, some were cleaning their pistols and

With an answering yell, the savage lashed his horse.

sabers and other fighting gear, still more were running to and fro bent on last minute chores. It was a familiar scene to Mathew after a year and a half in the army. It was one that, in the past, had invariably given him a feeling of repugnance.

But he felt apart from it this time. They were going west, into Indian country, to the aid of the wagon train. He was going east, back to civilization. Quickly his gaze sought the Allan wagon down in the narrow band of shade formed by the stockade wall. He could see Laurie Allan and her twelve-year-old brother, Jackie, standing by the near wheel watching several troopers who were hitching up their teams. Inside the wagon their father lay, ill and helpless.

They had run into bad luck all the way out from Kansas with the wagon train that had stopped at the fort several days ago. First their mother had sickened and died; then their father had fallen and broken his hip. Yesterday the army surgeon had advised them to return to Independence where they could get good medical care and, reluctantly, young eighteen year old Laurie Allen had agreed.

Mathew turned across the rectangle toward the barracks. The night the wagon train had stopped at the fort he'd helped Laurie Allan unhitch her teams and feed and water them. She'd been too tired, and too heart-sick, to do much; had stood and watched him, and followed him about; and when he'd finished had given him a smile that had meant more to him, strangely, than any words of thanks she might have uttered. He'd seen her twice since then when they'd spoken shyly to each other and she'd smiled that sweet smile that seemed somehow to soften and color everything about her, even the harsh ugliness of the desert.

Mathew entered the dark, low-ceilinged barracks and made his way to his bunk in the corner. The air was foul with the same stench of sweat and saddle leather and gun oil that had sickened him for so many months. Swiftly he gathered up his belongings and rolled them into his blanket. It took but a minute.

He was just finishing when he felt a hand on his shoulder and turning, found Red Buntley, his sergeant, and his father's closest friend, confronting him. Buntley was a short, squat, bowlegged, grizzled old veteran who had served with Colonel Locke for thirty odd years, and loved him like a brother.

He said now, a frown in his half-closed, appraising eyes, "The Colonel tells me you're not going with us, Matt."

Mathew waited expectantly. Buntley, who didn't like him, had never called him Matt before.

"The Colonel would be a mighty happy man—" Buntley was speaking slowly—"if you was to go and ask if you could ride west with him, instead of east—"

He paused and looked at Mathew questioningly. Mathew shook his head and the old soldier's face hardened.

"The only way to get over a thing like that is to go out and lick it, not run from it," he said harshly.

Mathew's lips tightened. There it was again. In effect Buntley was telling him that he was a coward. It was what the other members of the troop thought of him. It was what his father thought. He'd tried to explain to his father. He told Buntley now.

"I don't like the army; I never did." He couldn't keep the bitterness from his voice. "I was forced into it because the Lockes had been soldiers for two hundred years. Least of all I wanted to come out here to this God-forsaken country. I hate it. That's all that's the matter. I'm not a coward, Buntley."

IT WAS TRUE. He hated army life. He hated the desert. He hated cruelty and savagery, in the Indians, in the troopers who were his companions, in his father even. He didn't like to fight, or kill, or see others be killed. It had nothing to do with religious beliefs. He knew that men had fought and killed throughout the centuries, and most likely would continue to do so for countless more. But he wanted no part of it.

He wanted no part of frontier life. He'd studied science and chemistry in school back in Philadelphia where he'd lived with his aunt until his father had insisted he join him in the army. He wanted to go on to college and continue his studies. He wanted, most of all, to live in a civilized, peaceful and orderly world, not one that was governed by harsh brutality.

"What about Horse Mesa?" Buntley reminded him.

Mathew stiffened. At Horse Mesa, he knew, any respect the troop had ever had for him had been lost. He would never forget that fierce charge into the Indian village and the slaughter that had followed. He'd taken no part in it. Sick to his very soul he'd sat his horse at one side, and looked on. They'd said he was yellow after that. That incident, more than any other, had branded him.

He tried now to tell Buntley how he felt; but he saw not the slightest bit of understanding in the older man's eyes—only scorn and disgust—and he stopped talking abruptly and turned on his heel. He left the nearly empty barracks. Outside the troop was just mounting. Under their sharp scrutiny he turned toward the stables. He saddled his horse and with the reins in his hand, walked toward the Allan wagon. As he drew near it Laurie Allan swung around from a bundle she was tying, and looked at him, unsmiling.

It was an unhappy, not exactly unfriendly, but skeptical, look that confronted him, and he knew instantly that the troopers who had helped her hitch up had told her about him. There was surprise in her glance, as though she still wasn't quite ready to believe what they had said to her.

She was a slender slip of a girl, fair-haired and brown-eyed as the man's homespun shirt that she was wearing and the too-long trousers that were tucked into cowhide boots. With the back of her hand she brushed a strand of hair from her eyes, and at last she smiled at him uncertainly.

"We're all ready to go," she said. "I understand you're to be our escort."

Mathew studied the curve of her lips and nodded shortly. They both turned as the sound of a bugle filled the stockade. The troop was drawn up across the quadrangle and now Colonel Locke stepped out of his quarters and strode to his waiting horse. Once again the bugle sounded and the line of horsemen swung into motion.

Mathew watched in dismay. His father was leaving without a word or a sign of goodby. He stood at attention as the flag, and then his father went by. Buntley, as he passed, turned his head toward him and Mathew was aware of his angry scowl. The troop filed by, two abreast, and there were more glances flung in his direction; scornful glances—glances that told him plainly what everyone was thinking.

White of face, Mathew turned to his horse and swung into the saddle. Laurie had been watching him and even less than the stares of the troopers was he able to bear her scrutiny, to be conscious of what she, too, might be thinking.

Without a word she scrambled up into the driver's seat beside her brother Jackie. Her father lay in the wagon bed, propped up where he could look out over the tailgate and see what was going on. Mathew raised his hand in greeting. John Allan stared at him a moment, then returned the greeting silently.

LAURIE'S whip cracked and the wagon moved forward as the horses strained into their collars. Mathew rode by the left rear wheel and they passed through the gate that way, and turned east down the slope of the rise on which the fort was built. Half a mile west they could see the last of the cavalry just disappearing into some cottonwoods along the river bank.

Mathew pulled his hat brim over his eyes to shade them from the glare that struck at him like a hammer-blow. Around him, in every direction, lay the desert, black and barren and scarred, a line of mountains to the south, to the north a few hills, and here and there a butte or a mesa or a mound of rocks rising up from the desert floor like great ugly warts. A hot wind blew in his face. Sand and dust swirled up from his horse's hooves, sifted through his clothes, in no time blackened his face, gritted between his teeth. High overhead a lone buzzard wheeled in silent flight. He glanced down at the bleached bones of a horse lying beside the trail.

A shiver of revulsion passed through Mathew. He'd never been more thankful for anything in his life than for the fact that he was leaving this ugly country. And yet his heart was heavy. He was still shocked by the way his father had ridden off, ignoring him completely. From that alone it was plain to what extent the old soldier's pride had been hurt.

They crossed the shallow trickle, all there was of the Scorpion River ten months out of the year, and lurched up the steep bank

of the arroya. Standing up with the long reins in one hand and the whip in the other and the wind blowing her hair back from her face, Laurie handled her teams and the big wagon expertly.

Mathew marvelled at her. Her father had been a tailor and she'd been studying to be a school-teacher before they'd left Vermont, she'd told him. Like thousands of others they'd succumbed to the lure of greener pastures. Like hundreds before them they'd been forced through misfortune to turn back before reaching their goal.

All that morning they pushed forward at a fast walk, Mathew setting the pace. He rode ahead part of the time, in the rear occasionally, and on the flanks, but never once beside the wagon near where Laurie sat.

At noon they stopped to rest the horses and to eat a brief meal of journey cakes and cold meat. "Have some more?" Laurie asked when he was finished. They were the first words that had passed between them since leaving the fort. Mathew shook his head. He could feel Laurie's eyes on him. More than once during the morning he'd been conscious of her glance bent on him, wonderingly, appraisingly.

They continued their journey after thirty minutes, following the broad trail that wound through cactus and mesquite toward a line of hills that rose in their path. The sun grew hotter, the dust thicker. The lone buzzard had been joined by another. They were both wheeling in silent arcs overhead.

IT was mid-afternoon when they entered the hills, and cut through them down a narrow, rocky gorge. Mathew climbed a low promontory to look back over the way they had come, and it was then, when he was least expecting it, that he received the greatest shock of his life. It was a tell-tale wisp of dust, glimpsed for an instant on their back trail, that jerked him upright in the saddle, leaning tensely over his horse's neck, eyes straining anxiously through the heat and glare.

It came again, that wisp of dust-cloud three or four miles out on the desert floor, but slightly nearer this time and he felt his heart begin to pound. There was no doubt about it. Someone was following them; and since there was no reason for anyone at the fort to do so, it could only mean one thing.

With a roughness he didn't mean Mathew reined his horse around and cantered after the wagon. The nearest habitation, a lone cattle ranch, was twenty or more miles further east. To go back was impossible. Which left only one alternative. His mouth turned dry at the prospect.

He overtook the wagon and rode up alongside of it until he was opposite the seat and Laurie Allan. He tried to keep the dread from his voice when he said, "We'll camp for the night on the other side of the hills. Keep going until you find a site and wait for me there. Don't unhitch. Just wait."

She was frowning down at him but, if she suspected anything, she didn't show it. She nodded and said, "All right," and gave him a smile that was the warmest of any he'd received that day.

He reined to a stop and the wagon clattered by. He saw her stand up and look back at him over the canvas top; then swiftly he wheeled and cantered back through the gorge. He reached the same promontory, but reined up behind a screen of pinon trees this time. He stood in the stirrups and peered intently down at the desert.

The dust-cloud had drawn nearer—much nearer—and now he could make out a single rider. In vain his eyes sought for a glimpse of blue uniform and the glint of sun on saddle trappings, saw instead the bare backed pony and the half-naked, brown-skinned savage astride it.

Mathew stared down at the oncoming horse and rider and a fresh spasm of hatred gripped him. It wasn't directed so much against the Indian as against this savage, brutal country. He alone stood between that Indian down there and Laurie and her father and brother. It was a big responsibility, and all at once he knew he'd made a mistake when he hadn't told them to run for it.

Mathew rode his horse down off the promontory and tethered it in a clump of brush. He hooked his saber to the saddle and drawing his rifle from its scabbard climbed back up the hill. He stopped halfway to the top and lay down behind a pile of boulders. The trail passed below him,

some six feet down, and from this vantage point he could command a view of it for over a hundred yards. He slid his rifle between two boulders, after making sure the breech was loaded.

Then he lay still and stared down that hundred yard stretch of trail. In a few minutes the Indian would come riding up it, would come into range of his rifle sights. A gentle squeeze, a puff of smoke, and it would all be over.

An ocean of heat waves rose about Mathew. A brown lizard slithered over the rock, inches from his head, and stared at him with small unblinking eyes. He could feel the heat pressing in on him, could feel the sweat soaking the back of his shirt until it clung to his skin. He'd never killed a man, though he'd been presented with the opportunity many times in the last year. He'd never even killed an animal of any size.

The minutes passed and he lay there. A faint sound down the trail, of a hoof striking rock, brought the blood pounding into his temples. His finger about the trigger tightened.

Again the sound was repeated, louder this time, and then the horse and rider came into view around a shoulder of rock and started up the stretch of open trail. Mathew sighted down his rifle barrel, drawing a bead on a broad and naked chest. Above the chest were powerful shoulders, and above them a ferocious, sullen, paint-daubed face. The Indian was a big man. He was naked, all except for a breech-clout and three feathers that stuck straight up out of his black stringy hair. And old flintlock was draped across his pony's withers, and in his belt hung a tomahawk and a knife, one on either side.

He was only fifty yards away at first. Then the range narrowed to forty yeards. Mathew knew he couldn't miss. He could kill the savage with one shot. It was thirty yards. Then twenty...ten. The Indian was almost directly below him and riding out of range, and still he held his fire. His body had grown as rigid as the lizard by his head. His finger was frozen to the trigger.

AND in that instant he knew he couldn't do it. He couldn't kill. He'd tried—but a still greater force had held him back, held him shackled while the Indian passed out of range below.

Mathew rose to his feet. There was another way. Even as he sprang out into space he knew it was a long chance. To take this Indian alive would be a feat for a bigger man than he, a man who knew how to fight rough and tumble, to kick and bite and gouge, and to keep from being killed. But stop the Indian he must. A picture of the Allans waiting trustingly beyond the hills had risen sharply before his eyes. His action was one of despair.

As he hurtled down from the safety of his boulder he uttered a shrill yell. He didn't know why, unless it was in the hope he could strike fear into his adversary. In the same breath he realized the futility of it. The savage was startled, nothing more. His head snapped up, his features contorted. With an answering yell he lashed his horse. It bounded forward and Mathew's shoulder struck naked flesh. His fingers clutched at slippery, coppery skin —missed, and he fell sprawling into the sandy trail.

He sprang up. The Indian had left his pony's back and was crouched now in the trail, less than a dozen feet away. The impact of their bodies meeting had flung the Indian's rifle into some mesquite, but in his hand he was holding a long gleaming knife; and his other was just drawing the tomahawk from his belt.

Sweat, cold as ice now, stood out on Mathew's brow. He'd acted without thinking, blindly, foolishly. He was totally unarmed. His saber had somehow been ripped and flung from him—no time to scrabble for it—and his rifle was still lying between the two boulders over his head. He clenched his bare hands. They—and they alone—were all he had to fight with.

They faced each other there in the middle of the trail, the slim, white-faced young trooper and the big powerfully-muscled Indian; then the savage moved. Mathew dropped to the ground, heard the tomahawk whistle over his head and shatter against some rocks behind him. The savage moved again, this time springing forward, his knife arm rising.

Mathew rose to one knee. He couldn't run. The savage would overtake him in a dozen bounds. He did the only thing left to him. He rose to meet the Indian's

rush with two handfuls of sand. Desperately he flung them into the savage's eyes.

It stopped the savage as though he'd been clubbed with his own tomahawk. He pawed at his eyes with his fingers. His face twisted and he grunted with pain.

Mathew scooped up another handful of sand and flung it. The Indian rushed at him, blindly, hacking right and left with his knife. He was trying vainly to open his eyes—eyes that were red and bloodshot and nearly sightless.

Mathew kept his distance from that hacking knife. He picked up a rock the size of his fist and threw it. It struck the Indian on the temple and brought him to his knees. Before he could rise Mathew picked up another and bigger rock. He stepped in close and flung it with all his strength. Without a sound the Indian fell forward. He didn't move again.

Mathew stared down at the inert mass of naked flesh, more in surprise than triumph. He approached the Indian warily. When he'd made sure it wasn't just a trick he swiftly removed his belt and bound the other's hands. He felt safer then. He stood over his enemy in relief, and in some triumph now, and with a sense of satisfaction such as he had never known before. He could have killed the Indian, shot him down with little or no risk to himself; but he hadn't. He'd done nothing that he would ever be sorry for. He'd done nothing to drag himself down to the level of this country which he hated so passionately.

He stood in the trail a moment, to gain his breath; then he left the Indian lying where he'd fallen while he went for his horse. He climbed the rocks for his rifle. With it in his hand he turned to cast a glance across the desert, and was startled to see a second dust-cloud out there. But in the same breath his eyes caught the glint of sabers and rifle barrels and the friendly blue of uniforms. He watched the cloud sweep in toward the hills and wondered what the cavalry was doing out here. Every available man from the post had been sent to the aid of the wagon train.

The troopers were still some distance away and he didn't wait for them to come up. The Indian was just regaining consciousness and Mathew caught his pony and with his rifle prodded the dazed and nearly blind savage onto its bare back. He mounted his own horse, then driving the other before it, started down the gorge.

The wagon was drawn up, waiting for him on the flat plain on the other side of the hills. As he rode up Laurie and her father and brother stared, white-faced, at the Indian. Mathew told briefly what had happened. He was just finishing when a group of riders cantered out of the hills.

Red Buntley and six troopers drew up beside the wagon and dismounted. They stared from Mathew to the Allans to the prisoner slumped over his pony's neck.

"Scouts reported sighting an Indian on your trail," Buntley explained his presence shortly, "and we came as fast as we could, thinking—"

He looked again at the Indian, then at Mathew questioningly. Briefly Mathew repeated what he had just told the Allans. He was aware of Laurie measuring the size of the savage with her eyes, then looking at him and seeming to swallow with difficulty.

"Take him back to Colonel Locke," Mathew said quietly. "With my compliments."

HE DREW a deep breath when he read the approval in Red Buntley's eyes. He'd finally made the hard-bitten old sergeant and these troopers understand his feelings, and in the language they knew best. What was more important, the Colonel would be able to hold his head high before his men, knowing they no longer thought his son a coward.

The troopers left half an hour later. Mathew watched them ride away; then he turned to Laurie. Her eyes were looking at him with an unfathomable expression. She cracked her whip; the wagon creaked forward. He rode alongside the wagon. The minutes passed and the hills sank into the desert behind them.

Added color had now come into her cheeks. It made her look prettier than ever and he wanted to tell her so, but the words wouldn't pass his lips. They exchanged shy glances. Words didn't seem necessary somehow. It was as though they both knew there would be plenty of time for that later.

NEW MEXICO
The SUNSHINE STATE
by
WALTER GALLI
EXPLORED BY SPANIARDS BEFORE 1550 NEW MEXICO DID NOT BECOME A STATE UNTIL 1912! THE EARLY EXPLORERS CAME TO THE SUNSHINE STATE SEARCHING FOR THE FAMED SEVEN CITIES OF CIBOLA.....
GREAT SEAL OF THE STATE OF NEW MEXICO
CRESCIT EUNDO
1912
..A MOORISH SLAVE OF CABEZA DE VACA, NAMED ESTEVAN, WAS THE FIRST TO DISCOVER NEW MEXICO.. HOWEVER HE WAS CAPTURED AND SLAIN BY INDIANS.
AZTEC
GALLUP
SANTA FE
SANTA FE TRAIL
LAS VEGAS
ALBUQUERQUE
FORT SUMNER
BILLY THE KID SHOT AND KILLED BY SHERIFF PAT GARRETT..
ROSWELL
LINCOLN COUNTY CATTLE WARS
GERONIMO SCOURGE OF THE SOUTHWEST....
RIO GRANDE RIVER
PECOS RIVER
LAS CRUCES
CARLSBAD
NATURE'S MOST MIRACULOUS HANDIWORK THE CARLSBAD CAVERNS
ON JULY 7, 1540, CORONADO FOUGHT THE FIRST BATTLE AGAINST THE SOUTHWEST INDIANS !!

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THE EDITOR.

Along The Outlaw Trail

By JOHN VERNON DALEY

AFTER the disastrous results that accompanied our train robbery at Walsh, Indian Territory, what was left of our organization was demoralized, and scattered. For in this enterprise, Lucky and Texas Pete both met the fate they had accorded others. Eddie Estelle and Dick Dine were wounded and captured. I was recognized but, owing to the swiftness of my mount, escaped. But the additional rewards offered for my capture, or death, incited the bounty hunters, both law and outlaw—between which, at that time in the Territory, there was small distinction—to hunt me as if I were a rabid beast.

I was only seventeen years of age at the time, and scarcely a year in the Territory, but in that short space had acquired a reputation second only to Billy the Kid.

Our leader, Henry Starr, unsuspected as yet, but afterwards known as the most dangerous outlaw in the Southwest, lay wounded at his ranch, over by the Cherokee Reservation. When I disguised myself as an Indian and paid him a visit, he urgently advised me to leave that part of the country—at least for a while. He told me that he was sending Ben Cravens, renegade Creek Indian member of our gang, over into New Mexico to collect a horse herd, and suggested that I join him on the venture.

I knew Ben but slightly. He was a reputed killer, merciless and dangerous, and feared both by the law and his associates.

When I signified my willingness to join Ben, Starr gave me a message to give him, and told me I would find him at the Cherokee Inn—a notorious resort situated

a mile from Muskogee on the highway leading toward the Kansas border.

Arriving at the Inn, I found Ben and gave him Henry's message. After reading it he told me he would be pleased to have me accompany him. And that, over in New Mexico, we would have no trouble in collecting a fine herd of horses, as the bloody Apaches and treacherous Navajos were raiding the ranches along the Arizona border of horses that could be had for a trifle.

Shortly after the noon-hour meal, we left over the well-travelled trail along the Strip, leading Westward. Ben hit a swift pace and toward midnight we spread our bankets in a buffalo wallow, forty miles from Muskogee.

Next morning, after a breakfast of parched corn and jerk, we resumed our journey and followed the crooked trail along the Strip. Ben told me we were about ten miles from the little town of Tonkawa, and as he wished to acquire information about the country ahead, we would remain there a few days.

He advised me to be on my guard, as the town was a hangout for bounty-hunting outlaws and whiskey peddlers.

We reached the town next morning around eight o'clock, jogging down a dusty road between a double row of frame shacks and treading our way around wagons and buckboards. Milling along the board walks were Indians, 'breeds, and a few double-gunned white men.

WHEN Ben stopped at the boarding house to arrange for our accommodations, I led the horses into the feed lot adjoining. An aged Indian attendant came forward, and helped me unsaddle them, and we were leading them to the water trough, when a man rode in and called him. The old Indian, puzzled at my disguise, had spoke to me in several different Indian dialects, and no doubt failed to hear him.

The fellow, a rawboned, six-foot, double-gunned individual, quickly dismounted, came over and hit the old Indian, sending him sprawling. When he started kicking him, I told him to cut it out. He looked at me with lips twisted into an ugly snarl. His hands on gunbutts, he inquired, "Looking for trouble, Indian?"

When he started shucking his cutters, I shouted at him, "Drop them guns, you fool!"

As he paid no attention, I sent several shots buzzing about him. I didn't want to hurt him, but only scare him into dropping his guns—which he did.

He was a badly frightened gunnie, and a cowardly one, too. "Run, damn you," I shouted at him. He ran all right and the old Indian grunted in derision.

Yet I regretted the necessity that had caused me to use my guns, as I had no desire to attract attention.

But it was fated otherwise. The frightened gunnie had scarcely disappeared around the corner of the boarding-house when two men came from the house, and stalked toward me. That they were friends of the man I had disarmed ready to take up his quarrel, there was small room for doubt. With hands on gunbutts, they halted ten paces from me, and stood glaring at me with definite hostility written on their faces.

Glancing toward the house, I saw Ben approaching hurriedly and, as he drew near, I could see that he was in a killing mood. He was upon them before they observed him. That they knew him, I could tell from their altered expressions. Quickly removing their hands from their gunbutts, they spoke together, "Howdy, Ben."

The Indian ignored their salute and inquired in tense words, "Were you and Bryant looking for an argument?"

"Not with you," the tall gunnie said hastily.

"Then, whatever your argument is, forget it," Ben admonished.

"Forget it, and let this 'breed get away with gunning up Casey?" the tall gunnie asked in an amazed tone.

"You had better," the Indian said grimly. There was raw hell in his eyes when he made the added statement. "But of course that's up to you and Bryant. The man you have just named a 'breed is my friend, known as the Gunslick Kid. Heard of him, ain't you?"

They apparently had. My reputation as a gunswift was spreading!

The tall gunnie approached, and appraised me keenly. "Indian, eh?" he remarked. "Looks like I spoke out of turn," he said, "I apologize for the word, 'breed."

Ben introduced them as Charley Bryant and Henry Newcome, gunmen and outlaws—like ourselves. Bryant proposed a drink and we went over to the boarding-house, or resort, as I found that they sold liquor to Indians, in flagrant violation of the law.

The place was divided into a barroom, with a sprinkling of gaming tables. There was about a dozen men in the large room—mostly white. Standing at the bar toying with an empty whiskey glass, was a slender young man with sandy colored hair, gray eyes, and rather handsome features. He was dressed expensively; his calfskin half-boots and white Stetson sombrero cost plenty. Around his thin hips was a shell-covered belt that held bone-butted forty-five caliber Colt guns, in hand tooled holsters.

I bent a puzzled glance at two bearded men that sat at a table across from where I stood at the bar. They were hard for me to place. They were hard-looking characters. Although dressed in the usual cattle country attire, they looked more like barroom bums than cattlemen or outlaws.

While I was sipping my drink they approached the bar and stood staring at me, their whiskey bloated faces screwed into threatening scowls. Then one of them pointed his finger at me and bellowed, loud enough for the whole barroom to hear, "Men, I've seen this fellow's face too many times on the wanted posters for him to fool me with his stained face. They're offering a small fortune for him, dead or alive, and here is where me and my partner collect."

I waited until his gun cleared leather and then shot it from his hand. "The next shot will be in the guts, fellow," I told him.

THE fancy dressed young fellow stepped in front of him, and said, "The only thing you and your partner stand to collect around here is a lot of hot lead. Go back to your table and sit down. Maybe you will want to be collecting on me, next?"

"No such thought ever entered my head, Mr. Dalton," the fellow replied as he hastened to obey the command.

Seeing that the crowd still stared at me, some even fingering their gun-butts, I stepped away from the bar and addressed them. "The reward is still open, fellows," I told them, "and if there is any more 'bounty hunters among who wants to collect, now is your chance. But I warn you—the next man who shucks his cutter will die—slow."

The bartender said, "No 'bounty hunters are welcome here."

The young fellow, addressed as Dalton, was looking at me keenly, and now inquired, "Haven't I met you somewhere before?"

"My name is John Daley," I told him, "and when I gave marksmanship exhibitions with the Wild West Show I was billed as the Gunslick Kid."

"Yes, I remember now," he exclaimed, extending his hand. "My name is Gratten Dalton. I am glad to meet you."

Ben, standing near me, was boring Grat with his black-deadly eyes. He now inquired, "Glad to meet me, too—Deputy?"

Although he spoke in a conversational tone, there was something about the remark to cause Dalton to stiffen and turn red with anger. But when he spoke he did so in an indifferent tone, asking, "Why not, Cravens?" Then, addressing me, he said, "I'll be seeing you, if you stick around, Johnny," and, followed by Bryant and Newcome, he left.

Ben, watching them depart, smiled grimly and said, "Grat is a brother of United States deputy marshal, Frank Dalton. Both he and his brother Bob wear special deputy's badges, given them by Frank, although he is aware that they are wanted in the States for robbery. Gratten, besides heading a gang of cattle rustlers, is using his badge to rob whiskey peddlers—such as those two that pointed you out. Newcome and Bryant are members of his gang, also Daniel Casey, the gunnie you disarmed. They are treacherous, Johnny. Watch yourself at all times."

This was a long speech for the killer to make. But, like most Indians, he never forgot or forgave a wrong. Frank led the posse that ended so disastrously for our gang, when we robbed the train at Walsh.

Several acquaintances joined Ben and, as I had small interest in their conversation, I decided to go for a walk before dinner. I went out to the barn and, finding our horses' feed boxes empty, tipped the

old Indian to give them extra feed. I then took a walk along the plank walk of the village. I assumed an air of unconcern—outwardly careless, but inwardly never more alert in my life. I had walked two-thirds of the way along the block, when I saw a familiar figure approaching; it was Casey, the outlaw. When about to pass me by, he looked up and recognized me. He was drunk, and still smarting under the humiliation of making himself ridiculous in front of his companions. Now with his courage boosted by liquor, he needed, I judged, but slight provocation to go into action. A crafty, vengeful smile twisted the corners of his mouth; his hands hovered over gun-butts.

Believing him about to draw, and not wishing to take advantage of his present condition, I pleaded with him. "Don't compel me to kill you, fellow," I told him. "I can easily do so before your guns can clear leather." He hesitated for a moment, then stepped back and folded his arms. With voice trembling with rage, he shouted, "Yes, I've heard of you. You're the gunslick that's been doing stunts with a lousy show. You're a——"

He cursed me with every foul name he could think of, and he thought of plenty. Told me he would shoot me in the back, the first opportunity I gave him. His loud blustering caused a crowd to gather, and I slid over putting my back to a store front, facing them. Seeing he had an audience and perhaps some of his friends present, he became more abusive. He howled curses and insults at me that even shocked the case-hardened riff-raff that surrounded us.

When I saw sneers on their faces and looks of contempt cast at me, I became angry also and told him, "You are howling now, like a big bad wolf. But a short while ago you had your tail where it belongs—between your legs—and were running then, like the cur you are. And, if you don't shut your loud mouth, and go about your business I am going to shoot off your ears."

I didn't believe he would swallow the insult in front of the crowd. However, he did and, after uttering a jeering laugh, walked away.

I was to learn later that when he threatened to shoot me in the back, he was but following the custom of many of his kind that infested the Territory.

I resumed my walk and when I came to the end of the block started to cross to the other side. I was in the middle of the street when suspicion stabbed me and I reached for my guns. As I did, my head seemed to explode. Then a shot rang out, and a whiff of smoke curled from a doorway across the street in the direction I was headed.

GASPING, wavering, fighting to retain my balance, I unloosed a stream of lead into the partly open door from which the shot was fired. Still struggling but fed with consuming anger that called forth energy needed for the occasion, I staggered to the building and kicked open the door. I entered with guns ready and raked the room with a hot glance. It was another resort; three men patronized the bar—two of them Indians. The other was an aged white man, dressed in buckskins, and wearing a coonskin cap.

Gritting my teeth to stay erect, I shuffled to the bar. "Speak up, you ambushing cowards," I told them, "before I blast you all to hell, and let the devil decide which one of you fired that shot."

The graybeard said, "Take it easy, boy. Don't act hasty. The man that fired the shot left by the backdoor. If I had known he was shooting at a boy, I would have stopped him."

There was no mistaking the sincerity of his utterance, and it was also apparent that he was no gunman. So I thanked him for his good intentions. But, when he offered to dress the wound in my scalp, I told him that before my investigation was ended it might not be necessary.

When I made the remark, the bartender gave me a dirty look and said, "If you are looking for information around this joint, Indian, address your remarks to me."

Taking him at his word, I did. "One of your friends," I told him, "took a shot at me from that doorway a few moments ago. Who is the cowardly skunk?"

"I am neither his guardian nor yours," he said with a sneer. "In this place they come and go as they damn please, and it is none of my business what they do."

As the hand he held beneath the counter

no doubt held a gun that he intended to use when the opportunity offered, I said, "Quit fumbling with that gun, and put your hands on the bar."

"And what if I don't," he said belligerently.

"If you don't," I told him in all sincerity, "I am going to shoot off your ears, and place the third shot between your eyes."

He must have sensed that I was in no mood to be trifled with. The cynical smile left his lips and he placed his hands on the bar.

"I hadn't included you in my killing plan," I told him, "but your hostile attitude has changed it. If you wish to continue living, talk, and make it convincing."

He started to parley. "That's quite an order you are handing out. Who in the hell do you think you——?" My gun blasted, and the lobe of his left ear disappeared. The blood drained from his face; clutching his bloody ear, he screamed, "Don't! Don't shoot! I'll talk! The man that shot you is United States deputy marshal Gratten Dalton. He came in here accompanied by these Indians, and ——." Guns blasted from the rear and, with a gurgling sound, he collapsed.

The graybeard standing by my side went over the bar at a leap, grasping his carbine in his hand, blood staining his gray hair. "Get behind the bar, you damn cub," he shouted. "Here is the chance to show you are the curly wolf you claim you are."

I looked in time to see them, Grat and the two Indians, leaving by the backdoor. Upon seeing they were observed, they turned and blasted. What no doubt saved my life was that the oldster was standing between me and the backdoor. I shot from my hip, killing both Indians.

Judging that the shooting would cause a crowd to gather, and wishing to avoid further altercations, I left hurriedly by the backdoor, stepping over the Indians as they lay kicking their life out.

I emerged into a garbage-strewn alley and ran its length back towards the boarding-house. Unobserved, I crossed the street to the feed-lot and bathed my wounded scalp in the feed trough.

At the boarding-house, I found Ben engaged in a poker game and, not wishing to disturb him, went up to the room assigned us, washed and combed my hair over the wound, and went down to the dining room.

The rough benches held a score of roughly-dressed, hard-faced, double-gunned men. Prominent among them were the whiskey peddlers. Although everyone present must have known who I was, no particular attention was paid me. I found a vacant place on the bench and made a hearty meal and, when through, went back to my room. I bolted the door, removed my bandoleer and moccasins, and stretched out on the bed, to try and figure out why Grat had tried to kill me. Was it because I had humiliated one of his gunmen, or for the reward? Well, it made no difference. I meant to take his life for his cowardly attempt to take mine. But I decided to wait until the shades of night protected me from the back-shooters.

Too restless to remain on the bed, I walked about fuming, my mind poisoned with hate. I was startled when I heard a slight noise at the door. Tensed for action, I unbolted it, and stood aside. Ben spoke in the Creek dialect before he entered. "It's me, Johnny," he said.

HE GLIDED in swiftly, his moccasin-shod feet making no noise. There was a leering grin on his face and his deep-set beady eyes glistened like a snake. But there was anxiety in his voice when he spoke. "Allow no one to enter, and don't leave the room until I come for you. The Dalton gang, aided by others, have the place surrounded and are going to kill you for the reward. They have sent word to the Marshal's office at Fort Smith that you have killed two Chickapee Indian policemen. Be on your guard and wait my return," he said as he glided away silently.

Re-bolting the door, I strapped on my belt and bandoleer and walked the floor, waiting his return and, after what seemed hours, he came.

"Follow me quietly, Johnny," he whispered, "and throw down on the bartender, but don't shoot unless compelled to do so."

We entered the barroom noiselessly and were within a short distance of the bartender before he observed us. He started to draw, but seeing I had him covered, hesitated, and then made his draw. The Indian, with teeth bared and snarling like

a wolf, leapt in swiftly and drove his knife to the hilt above the collar-bone of the treacherous bartender. The blood squirted fountain-like and, uttering a gurgling moan, he collapsed like a wet rag.

Ben raised a window on the side of the house leading into the feed-lot and, although the night was black as pitch, cautioned, "Make no noise and keep under cover, Johnny, or we will have that bunch of hounds on our trail."

Creeping silently after the Indian, I made the barn without mishap and by the dim light of a lantern that was suspended from a rafter was putting the saddle on my mount when someone shouted in a raging voice, "What do you crawling coyotes think you are doing, coming——." His voice ended in a gasp of agony, as the Creek Indian's steel-like fingers tightened around his throat with crushing force.

He was a large man, but the slightly-built Indian picked him up and sent him sprawling. He lay as he had fallen, although he was not seriously injured, as I saw him gulping in welcome fresh air.

We dragged him into a stall, bound and gagged him securely, and then led out our horses. We mounted and were away without further trouble.

We travelled all that night and, shortly after daybreak, Ben informed me that we had crossed forty miles of prairie country, and were now in the rough, broken land occupied by the Chickapee Indians. We had no doubt made our escape from the Law—and the bounty-hunting, badge-toting outlaws, the Daltons.

BLOOD ON THE PELTS

By LEE E. WELLS

Young fur-trapper Antoine Monet had spent too much time in the roaring wilderness not to know his enemies, whether their hides were furry, or red—or even white!

THE LIGHT beneath the trees was always dim and uncertain, but this late in the afternoon it took on an eerie gloom. Now and then there were patches of soft, fading sunlight, where the ranks of the trees were broken, or where the river reflected a thousand glowing diamond points.

Antoine knew he was in time.

Antoine Monet's moccasins made no sound in the thick, leaf-covered loam. He carried no musket but a heavy sheath-knife and tomahawk rested in the broad leather belt around his slender waist. His long arms swung with the rhythm of his stride. A jay called and scolded somewhere ahead and Antoine instantly faded behind a tree, dark eyes keening ahead between the aisles of the glade.

A broad hat shielded his angular face, mahogany tanned, the jaw long and firm. He was young, about twenty-five but the wilderness had already stamped its mark on the wide, full lips and the deep set eyes that framed a long, slightly hooked nose. He listened for the sound of the jay again. This country of the Wabash was the tribal land of the Miami Indians and the jay might easily be red-skinned rather than blue-feathered.

The scolding faded away to the north

beyond the river. There seemed to be no hint of signal such as the Miamis would make. An animal, or bird might have flustered the jay, or it might have been Eduard Brouillet, and Antoine was anxious to find the man.

He pushed through a thick fringe of bushes, stopping just before he stepped out onto the bare, pebbly expanse of river bank. He searched the opposite shore. His black eyes moved downstream, then up. The setting sun sent long, mellow shafts of light along the river. Antoine seemed to be the only moving thing in this silent world of green.

Satisfied, he stepped out onto the beach, moving down to the water's edge. If Eduard was lost, surely the man would find the river and start working his way downstream to the distant camp. Earlier in the afternoon, Antoine and the rest had heard a single, distant musket shot and they had felt certain that Eduard would have meat for the camp. The three of them had plodded along, heading for distant Post Miami. Time had passed and the trapper, Eduard, had not returned. Antoine had become steadily more worried and at last he had given his pack to chubby Pere Aumont, directing the good father to make camp close to the river bank.

Antoine had spent the last two hours scouring the woods in an ever-widening arc around the camp site. He had not heard a second musket shot, nor had he cut the man's trail. The Miamis could easily have overcome Eduard and the thought sent a chill down Antoine's broad back.

"Ma foi," he whispered half aloud, "and he has the only musket! We'd have no chance with the red cannibals."

He moved upstream along the bank, hoping to hear the sound of another shot. He rounded a bend and eagerly searched the new vista of beach that opened before him. Far ahead, the beach pinched out, ending in an overgrown tangle of fallen, rotting logs that projected out into the water. The hopeful light faded from Antoine's eyes. He checked, half turned, wondering if he would work his way back to camp on the chance that Eduard Brouillet would have returned.

A musket roared with startling suddenness and the ball slapped through the air close to Antoine's head. In a single convulsive leap, he plunged into the safety of the underbrush. A wild, angry Miami yell sounded from behind the pile of logs and a wisp of blue smoke curled up into the air.

ANTOINE plunged deeper into the bushes, then halted, listening. He had heard nothing after that single yell but he knew that the Indians were close. With only knife and tomahawk, Antoine had no advantage. He checked his directions and edged stealthily toward the shelter of the trees. The Indians would be trailing after him and they might expect him to remain close to the river. He reached the trees, stopped to listen and watch his back trail. He had probably run into a small band of hunters or a scouting party and he had a chance of slipping away.

He heard the jay again, off to his right, scolding with all the power of its lungs. Antoine smiled faintly. He could picture the angry scowls of the Indians as they glared up toward the bird. A man could always depend upon the jays to give sufficient warning. Antoine moved off down the aisle of trees at a steady jog-trot, conserving his breath and strength for a swift burst of speed if the Miamis came close.

He did not head directly for the camp. That would only bring the Indians down on the rest of them. He cut away from the river, heading south-eastward. For the first tense moments, he expected to hear the triumphant, savage yell as the Miami closed in, or feel the crushing blow of a tomahawk spinning into the back of his skull.

The forest silence remained unbroken. Not far away, Antoine came on a small stream that coursed its way back to the Wabash. He plunged into it, turned sharply and splashed his way up its bed for several hundered yards. He saw a low tree limb overhanging the water. He jumped high and his strong hands taloned on the rough bark. He pulled himself up into the shelter of the leaves, stretched full length and waited.

Time passed but Antoine remained patient and silent. The sun sank lower but there was no sign of the Indians. At last

Antoine worked his way to the tree trunk, then out to the end of another limb before he dropped lightly to the ground. With a last glance down the brook he headed for the camp.

Night had fallen by the time he caught the gleam of the fire through the trees. Pere Aumont and Charles Voyeur had selected a good camp site in an open glade, one end bordered by the dark river. Antoine called to them and approached the fire with a feeling of relief. He smelled venison cooking. There were three men waiting for him around the fire.

"Eduard!" he exclaimed. "But you were lost!"

The flames played flickering shadows across Eduard's chunky figure. His powerful shoulders seemed twice as wide in the uncertain light and his bearded face appeared almost sinister. He chuckled and slapped Antoine's back with a heavy hand.

"Not Eduard, *mon ami.* I had the devil's own time finding the camp and game was scarce." His eyes narrowed and he clawed at his thick curling beard. "I heard a gunshot just before I found the camp. Miamis about?"

"I think so," Antoine nodded. Pere Aumont sat cross-legged before the fire, his black robe pulled up around his thick legs so that his shins toasted before the flames. He had a round, full-face, red-tinted now, and a pair of laughing blue eyes. His lips were full, slightly pursy. His flat-crowned hat lay to one side and the tonsure showed plainly, fringed by bushy black hair.

"Sit and have food first, my son."

"Indians," Charles Voyeur growled. He was tall and thin so that his greasy buckskins seemed to hang loose from his awkward shoulders. He rubbed his long pointed nose and squinted into the fire, thin lips peeling back from his teeth in a grimace. "Pardieu, if Eduard and I only had our muskets."

"*Le bon Dieu,*" Pere Aumont answered softly, "saw fit that the river received both your guns and your furs. If it is His will, the Indians will pass us by."

Antoine sat down and accepted a hunk of venison. The meat tasted good and he tore hungrily at it. Silence settled on the four men around the fire. Antoine, still eating, glanced up and caught Eduard's dark look full and square. The man flushed and then grinned through his beard and turned his attention again to his food.

Sudden suspicion flooded Antoine's mind. He lowered the hunk of venison, a muscle jumping in his lean cheek.

"How many shots did you fire, Eduard?" he asked abruptly.

"One," the man answered. He glanced up from under his shaggy brows. His coonskin cap sat well back on his coarse black hair. "One was enough for the deer."

"Where were you when you heard the Indian musket?"

"Somewhere west of here," Eduard answered. Pere Aumont nodded.

"He came in from that direction with the buck across his back. Ah, that was a grand sight."

ANTOINE returned to his food but his thoughts were busy. Two days before, he had met Eduard and Charles travelling up the Wabash toward Post Miami. Antoine himself carried his own packs of fur to the post, the profits of a whole season of Indian trading. For better protection, Antoine had joined them, though Eduard and Charles had hinted they intended to circle Post Miami and go on to distant Detroit.

Pere Aumont, the missionary to the Indians, had been their surety in Antoine's mind. No French renegades or outlaw, the *coureur de bois,* would be likely to travel with a man of God. The two canoes and the three muskets would have been good protection, and the two trappers stated they were *voyageurs,* men licensed by the Governor of New France to trap these waters and trade with the Indians.

Just yesterday, while paddling upstream, both Eduard and Charles drank heavily and steadily from a covered demi-john. As the hours passed, Antoine watched their canoe, just ahead of his own, travel more erratically. Just at sundown, trouble struck. Eduard, fairly reeling from the potent Indian firewater, sent the canoe across a snag that ripped the bottom from it. In less than a minute, canoe and men had plunged beneath the surface of the river.

Antoine had shot his canoe to the bank and dived in after them. Only his quick work had saved the two men, but every-

thing else they had carried was gone. After a long conference, Antoine had agreed to beach and hide his canoe. His fur packs would be divided between them and they would walk the rest of the way to Post Miami. This morning, Eduard had taken Antoine's musket and gone hunting.

Now Antoine thought of the Indian ambush. It could easily have been Eduard. The two had lost the whole of their year's work when the canoe went down. They were penniless and helpless unless they recouped their loss in some way. Antoine saw the dark bulk of his packs beyond Pere Aumont.

"I'll stand first watch," he said easily. "I'll take the musket, Eduard."

Charles Voyeur shifted uncomfortably and his long nose twitched slightly as he stared into the stygian darkness of the forest. Frogs made sleepy sounds along the river bank and an owl screeched from somewhere nearby.

"We'd best leave the camp," Voyeur said. "The Miami aren't far."

Eduard handed the musket to Antoine, reluctant to lose the weapon. He grunted and stretched out before the fire, grinning at Voyeur, a touch of impatience in his voice.

"*Pardieu,* there are always Indians! Let the dogs sleep in their own kennels and we'll stay to ours."

Antoine rested the musket across his knees, first examining the priming and the flint, making sure that a ball was in the barrel. He felt the pleasing warmth of the fire bake his face and chest. Pere Aumont murmured a prayer and then curled up in a black ball. In a few moments he gently snored. Voyeur still remained sitting across the fire, his gangling hands hanging limp over the edge of his knees.

"Eduard is a fool. Someday the Miami will get his scalp."

"He is a smart man," Antoine said and his shoulders lifted. "He knows the Indians around here, it seems."

"Who ever knows an Indian?" Voyeur growled disgustedly and rolled himself in a blanket to sleep.

The fire died down and Antoine gazed out into the dark night, hardly seeing the black shadow of the trees or the gray path of the river through the darkness. He kept thinking of the ambush by the fallen timber, the single shot and yell. Eduard was too good a woodsman to get easily lost in this forest.

Other things came to Antoine's mind. The firewater that had caused yesterday's disaster was in itself a mark of the renegade trader, though many *voyageurs* carried it for their own use. Under the stringent laws of France, neither whiskey nor guns could be traded to the Indians.

Antoine remembered the suggestion that the party circle around Post Miami and head directly for Detroit. Now Antoine wondered if the two actually intended to appear at Detroit. They could slip down the river to Lake Erie and Ontario and so slip undected into Quebec or Montreal or some of the small settlements where they would be protected and hidden by their friends.

Antoine stirred and Pere Aumont moved without awakening, at the slight noise. Everything pointed to trouble—serious trouble. Antoine could not watch Eduard and Charles all the time. If they really wanted to rob him, they had only to wait for the unguarded moment that was sure to come. Antoine's forehead knotted. Pere Aumont would not be much help. Abruptly, Antoine's face cleared and his eyes lighted. His fingers tightened around the musket and he nodded slowly.

He arose and stepped to Charles' side. He shook the man awake. "Your watch, *mon brave.* Everything is peaceful."

Charles sat up and yawned, stretching out his long arms. He moved closer to the fire, stared deep in the embers. Antoine rolled up in a blanket, the musket with him. For long minutes he watched Charles, shrewdly trying to read the man's character. There was something pinched and selfish in the man's face, a touch of cruelty in the thin lips. Antoine wondered why he had not seen it before.

SOME time in the night, Antoine snapped awake. Like a wild creature, he lay motionless, tense, every faculty strained. He heard a soft whisper just beyond the fire. Charles had awakened Eduard to take his turn at watch. Eduard's hoarse whisper sounded loud in the dark night.

"The musket?"

"He kept it," Charles whispered. "You bungled today. He is suspicious."

"Bah! I don't believe it. Anyhow, there will be another time."

"Make sure," Charles growled softly. "Each day we get closer to Post Miami. If we show up there, we're as good as hung."

"You talk too much," Eduard said cautiously.

"Why can't we just slip off with the packs?" Charles asked impatiently. *"Ma foi,* there would be less risk."

"With neither gun nor powder?" Eduard demanded. "No, there's a better way. I'll have the pelts soon."

"Very soon," Charles grunted, "or you won't have them at all. Think of that while you watch the fire."

HE moved off, then sharply turned and came to Antoine's side. He bent down, peering into Antoine's face. Antoine kept his eyes closed and his face placid. He breathed deeply and evenly. After a long moment, Charles arose and stood fingering his knife hilt. Then he turned and walked back to his blanket.

Antoine relaxed. The man would have committed murder just then. Only the presence of Pere Aumont, Antoine realized, had prevented the killing. The two renegade traders were reluctant, for the moment, to murder the man of God. Yet, if the packs were to be stolen without risk to themselves, then double murder must be committed somewhere between here and Post Miami. Pere Aumont's robe would soon be little protection.

The first streaks of pale dawn lit up the camp. Eduard built the fire. Antoine moved out from the camp, making a wide circle to cut possible Indian sign while Pere Aumont and Charles helped prepare breakfast and make the packs secure. Antoine came back to the camp and shortly after the small party headed once more toward Post Miami.

They cut away from the river in order to avoid discovery by some passing Indian canoe. Antoine went ahead while Pere Aumont trailed after Eduard and Charles, who were loaded with the packs. Antoine had only to watch for Indian sign and to perfect his plan of handling the problem the renegade traders presented. He would have to make his moves soon, he knew. Each step forward brought Post Miami that much closer and made murder that much more a certainty.

The two men would soon work themselves into a mood to kill Pere Aumont. When that moment came, then Antoine's life would not be worth a broken trading knife. About noon, Antoine came back to the rest of the party. They stopped in a pleasant forest glade that fringed the river.

Antoine slouched to the bank and watched the water flowing westward. He looked lazily down the stream and then turned to the rest.

"Hola! We'll go no further today. Fish would taste good tonight eh? We need the rest and it's not far now to Post Miami."

"I would feel safer inside the stockade," Pere Aumont said and rubbed his hand along his jaw. Eduard slipped off the pack and straightened.

"I'm for the fishing. *Mort a Dieu,* but the straps cut and the load gets heavy."

Charles said nothing but his eyes glittered when he caught Eduard's swift glance. He started building a fire while Antoine returned to the packs. He found fishhooks and then moved to the fringe of the woods, eyeing the trees. He cut two long branches with his hatchet and trimmed off the limbs. The packs produced lines for the improvised poles.

After a brief rest while they ate, Antoine pitched one of the poles to Charles. "There's a pool upstream, *mon ami.* Let's see what we can find."

They moved off, Antoine taking the musket. Eduard lazily watched them while Pere Aumont made himself comfortable on the warm, fine sand of the bank. Charles and Antoine moved out of sight of the camp and soon had their lines in the pool. For a long time, they sat in silence.

The musket lay beside Antoine, within easy reach. He as yet had nothing to fear. Charles rubbed his long nose and kept his eyes on the deep clear water.

"Eh, Charles, I did not know your partner had money in Detroit," Antoine said.

Charles' head jerked around, startled. "He hasn't."

"No money!" Antoine exclaimed. "Then why does he want—" he broke off short and shrugged, staring out across the river, a deep frown on his face. Charles watched him, shifted restlessly. His eyes narrowed and he scratched his head just under the coonskin hat.

"He couldn't buy a used Indian blanket," Charles said with a short laugh. Antoine pretended to emerge from a brown study. He leaned forward.

"You're sure?" he asked in a low voice and looked back toward the camp over his shoulder. *"Ma fois,* but he has fooled me. I had almost agreed to circle Post Miami and go on to Detroit."

Charles let the pole drop to his crossed legs. "This makes no sense. Eduard Brouillet has only what's on his back, and his pouch is empty."

"But he has friends in Detroit, no?" Antoine suggested.

"As penniless as he!"

"Mayhap," Antoine nodded and pursed his lips. "Ah, but then he tries to trick me. I am to say nothing to you. You would go ahead to see Pere Aumont reaches Post Miami safely. Then Eduard and I—" Antoine broke off and looked sidelong at Charles. "I had not fully agreed, you comprehend. I was to say nothing."

CHARLE'S fist doubled around the pole and his face became dark and suffused with color. He jerked in his line and swore at the empty hook. Impatiently he came to his feet and threw the pole to one side.

"There is no fish here. Eduard lies, my friend, and he wishes to trick you. Pay no attention to his stories. Your trip to Detroit will be for nothing."

"Mayhap," Antoine answered slowly, "but he spoke of friends—those who would see that the price of my furs is met once we reach Detroit. He would at least recover a portion of the loss when your canoe tipped over and sank."

"Lies, all of it," Charles snapped. Antoine raised his hand in warning.

"You may be right. But don't say a word to Eduard. It will only cause trouble among us. I'll give the thing some thought."

Charles flung himself around and strode off. Antoine smiled softly into the still pool and leaned his broad back against the tree. His line tugged and Antoine hauled in a fat cat fish. He rebaited the hook and threw it back in the water, glancing over his shoulder toward the camp. Charles was not in sight.

"I hope for bigger fish on the hook," Antoine said and then a touch of worry came to his eyes. *"Parbleu!* If I don't catch them, they will catch me!"

He returned to the camp an hour or so later with three large fish. Charles sat across the black ring of cold embers, scowling secretly at Eduard, who softly clawed at his thick, dirty beard and eyed the fur packs, judging their value. Occasionaly he licked his lips, a greedy gesture that Antoine did not miss. Neither did Charles, who scowled more fiercely.

The four men passed the afternoon and night at this spot. Hour by hour Antoine watched the suspicion and distrust grow in Charles. Eduard at first did not sense his partner's mood but at last even he could understand that something was wrong.

"Ha! have you a pain?" he demanded. "Did a fish bone stick in your throat?"

Charles impatiently threw Eduard's hand off his arm. "It is nothing."

He walked away from the group and sat down on the river bank by himself. Eduard stared after him and then turned to Antoine. "What ails the man?"

"I don't know. He'll lose his *malaise* by tonight, mayhap." Antoine raised his voice and he saw Charles' head jerk around. "You have many friends in Detroit, Eduard? They will help you?"

"Many," Eduard said and then looked wonderingly at Antoine. "Why do you ask?"

Antoine arose and took the man's arm. He pulled him toward the trees, making signs that he did not want Charles to overhear them. Eduard came on, puzzled and suspicious. At last Antoine stopped at the fringe of the forest. Charles had openly twisted around and watched them with narrowed eyes.

"Can you trust Charles?" Antoine asked. Eduard jerked back and his squinted eyes opened wide.

"Eh, why not?"

"Well, you and Charles are partners. I should think that what one gains, both

should have. What one loses, both should bear."

"You're talking riddles," Eduard grunted.

"The fur," Antoine said and pointed toward the packs. Charles had not missed the gesture though he could not hear the conversation. "Charles has said he would buy them for more than Post Miami will pay. He has friends who would give him the money, but he asks that I sell only to him. You have friends, too, Charles says, but he will see that I get more—even if you make an offer."

"You lie," Eduard grunted and his hand dropped down to his knife hilt. For a brief second Antoine feared he had overplayed his game, that the man would attack and kill here and now.

"My word, it is true. I believe that maybe you give a better offer before we come to an agreement."

"Charles said nothing to me," Eduard snapped.

"No, you are to take Pere Aumont into Post Miami for his own safety. Charles and I would slip on to Detroit where his friends—" Antoine broke off and smiled. "But I have thought that maybe you might offer more if you too had friends there."

Eduard clawed at his beard and considered Antoine shrewdly. Anger showed in his eyes but he managed to control it. "That is why you and Charles went fishing?" he asked abruptly.

"Perhaps. I have not answered Charles. Say nothing to him. Say we are discussing tomorrow's march if he questions you. But give me your answer by tomorrow night. If you make a better offer, *eh bien*, you get the pelts."

Antoine moved around him and back to the fire. Eduard slowly followed and Charles moved in from the bank. The two partners avoided one another's glances, but Antoine could fairly feel the crackle of suspicion and distrust between them. It even effected Pere Aumont who had no inkling of the devious game of life and death that his companions played.

ANTOINE let the tension build. Several times Charles fingered his knife. Eduard's thick fingers were constantly in his beard until it seemed he would fairly pull it out by the roots. Antoine shrewdly waited and at last decided the time had come to let the pot boil. He arose and picked up the musket.

"I'll scout for Indian sign," he said, "and maybe get some game. I won't be back before sundown."

He gave Eduard a significant glance and moved slowly off to the woods. He heard steps behind him and turned to face Charles just as he reached the edge of the woods.

"What did he say to you?" Charles asked in a swift whisper. Antoine looked over the man's shoulder to where Eduard scowled at them.

"He repeated his offer for the furs. I have done wrong to tell you this, *mon ami*. I will not sell to him. We'll go directly to Post Miami and the *facteur* will take my furs. He will not pay so high as Eduard has promised, but then there will not be so far to travel."

Antoine smiled and dismissed the whole thing with a gesture of his hand. He pivoted and strode off down the glade, soon to disappear into the woods.

Antoine continued ahead, though he wanted to return to the camp. But Charles might have trailed after him and Antoine would not take the chance of spoiling his plan. At last he decided that he had not been trailed, and he headed back toward the camp.

He slowed his pace while still some distance away, moving carefully from tree to tree, scouting ahead to make sure that neither of the renegades watched for him.

Antoine gave his musket a last check and then moved into the protection of a fringe of bushes. Slowly and carefully, he parted the branches until he could look out on the camp. Pere Aumont and Charles Voyeur sat by the dying fire. Eduard Brouillet paced slowly up and down the river bank. Charles sat close to the fur packs.

Antoine knew he was in time. Charles lifted his head and scowled at Eduard. Antoine could almost read his thoughts.

Eduard stopped pacing, half turned and tugged at his beard as he scowled at Charles. He came forward in long strides, halting but a few feet away from his partner. Pere Aumont looked up, the lazy comfort leaving his eyes when he saw the bearded, angry face. Eduard made a gesture toward the packs.

"So, *mon ami,* you think they are already yours."

Antoine felt a sudden clutch of fear. If these two compared notes, then his plan would easily collapse around his head. Charles came to his feet and stood eyeing his partner.

"No more than you, *cochon.* You'd trick me, eh?"

"Trick!" Eduard snarled. "You speak of trick! Am I a blind fool and dolt that I can't see through your sneaking way?"

"My sons," Pere Aumont scrambled to his feet and stepped between them. Eduard's powerful hands gripped the priest and swung him to one side. His bearded face was red and choked.

"Stay where you are," he warned. "This is nothing—"

He dropped like an empty sack. Charles had snatched his tomahawk from his belt when Eduard turned and a single sweep of his long arm had sunk the blade deep in his partner's skull. Pere Aumont gasped, face paling. He stared down at the twitching body and then raised horrified eyes to Charles.

"Murder!" he whispered.

Charles said nothing, his thin lips pinched. He bent down and disengaged the blade. Still bent over, he raised his head, his glittering eyes impaling Pere Aumont.

"You have seen too much. There's more to come when Antoine Monet returns."

Pere Aumont took a step back. Antoine moved from the bushes, raising his musket. Charles straightened, the tomahawk gripped for striking. He didn't hear Antoine but took a step toward the priest.

AT that moment Antoine fired. Charles' step saved him, the ball splitting the air where his head had been a second before. The renegade whirled on the balls of his feet, like a cat. He saw Antoine who cast aside the useless musket. Instantly Charles' arm flew back and lashed forward. The tomahawk came hurtling through the air, end over end.

Only a swift dodge saved Antoine. Charles jumped forward, the heavy knife jumping from the scabbard. The blade glinted in the setting sun as he lunged toward Antoine. Antoine had time only to snatch out his own knife when Charles crashed into him. The knife descended with the speed of light, but Antoine caught the man's wrist. They stood locked and straining, Charles' glaring eyes boring into Antoine.

With a savage twist and pull, Charles catapulted Antoine over his knee. Antoine landed a few feet away with a shaking thud. He instantly rolled to one side as Charles plunged the blade downward. It sank into the ground. Instantly Antoine lashed out with his arm, knocking Charles' feet out from under him. The man wrenched his knife free and swiped at Antoine's eyes, the blade missing by a scant fraction of an inch. Antoine caught the man's arm, brought up his knee. There was a sharp crack as the bone snapped and Charles screamed in agony, the knife flying off to one side.

Antoine reversed his knife and brought the leaded hilt down heavily on the man's skull. Charles rolled to one side, his broken arm lying at a horrible angle. Antoine pulled himself to his feet and picked up Charles' knife. Pere Aumont stood rooted, face pale, eyes round. "He's dead?" he asked.

"No," Antoine panted. "He sleeps for awhile."

"I don't understand this." Pere Aumont shook his head. Antoine explained how the two renegades had planned to murder and steal the furs. He told of his plan to sow suspicion in the mind of each, since neither Antoine nor Pere Aumont could know when the attack would come. Pere Aumont sighed and made a swift sign.

"You fought the Devil with his own weapons, my son—hatred, suspicion, distrust. Thank *le bon Dieu* you have won. But now what will we do?"

"Bury Eduard," Antoine answered. "Charles will be no trouble now. We'll cache the furs and take our prisoner to Post Miami."

"Leave the furs here?" Pere Aumont asked. Antoine looked at the fur packs and made a disgusted face.

"They'll be safe enough. There's blood on the fur, *mon pere,* and I'll be glad to be rid of them. I dedicate part of the price to a fund for your mission to the Miami Indians. That will erase some of the evil. Hola! Let us be on our way!"

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The hold-up was over by the time they got there.

GUNPOWDER GOLD

By CLIFF BISBEE

There could be only one end to the blood-feud the poisonous yellow ore had brought to the gold-mining Sunday clan. Shiftless Trace Sunday got set for a red-hot shoot-out.

WHEN TRACE RODE DOWN through the incredibly towering forest trees of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, he figured he was not more than a day ahead of a bad storm.

Not that he was worried. It was said of Trace Sunday that no man from Lassen to Tehachapi had a more intimate knowledge of the wild and uninhabited High Sierra country. Certainly no one knew better than Trace that a roaring blizzard is no joke when it hits the rugged, two-mile high passes in those unparalleled mountains. He was glad enough that old King Sunday's imperious summons gave him an excuse to break a six-month period away from the trouble-worn trails of other men.

The way he looked at it, the Old Man's message must have something to do with gold, because gold and the power it gave

him were just about King Sunday's only concerns. Trace himself hated gold and nearly everything it stood for. He liked to maintain that he was the family outcast by both circumstance and preference.

He loved his roving life and his freedom, and figured he owed allegiance to neither man nor country. Somewhere in the East the War Between the States was raging. But that was far away. Partisanship meant ties and ties were not for Trace Sunday.

Yet for all his freedom, as he rode now along a timbered ridge above Mormon Gulch, with his two dogs, Shag and Lobo, cruising beside the trail, he knew a gnawing hope that old King Sunday was at last ready to forgive him. It was no fault of Trace's that Carmen Sunday had died when he was born, twenty-two years ago, but the grief-stricken King had hated him from that very day. Trace had stood neglect and abuse until he was twelve, then had struck out for himself, mostly trapping and hunting in the High Sierra.

He looked as much like a woods animal as either of his two big dogs. He was middling tall, lean as a hungry cougar and almost as supple of limb and body. His face was brown and high-cheeked and his blue eyes had a squint that had developed from a spell of snow blindness several years back.

King Sunday's blunt message had been left for him at Injun Jim's trading post in the lumber camp where he sometimes called for supplies.

Come home!

The note bore those two words and nothing more. Injun Jim had held it almost a full month until Trace had happened by. He had left immediately for Jacques Camp, where King Sunday had built his big mansion when the Independence Mine first came through on a high-grade vein. That faint and dogged hope rode with him along the forest trails. It might be that King Sunday was ready to bury the hatchet.

Within him, too, was a quickened desire to see Nugget, lovely and wilful niece of King's second wife. The girl's real name had been Lina Brackett, but the Old Man, with his customary domination, had changed it to Nugget Sunday when he adopted the girl at the age of six. As for his two brothers, Dee and Boze, a timber cruiser he had met told him the floating rumor that the Sundays had closed up their biggest mine, the Providence at Jacques Camp, because of a falling out over Civil War issues.

"More'n likely it's gold they're squabbling over," Trace had said with a shrug. "Well, let 'em fight. I've always said gold was spewed up out of Hell for men to war over. Most things have good and bad in 'em. All that yellow gold in the Sierra Nevadas is just the natural poison oozing out to mar the world's finest mountains. If Dee and Boze and Old Man King Sunday cornered every ounce of the stuff it would be all right by me."

TRACE was about a half mile above the last steep pitch into the stage road in Mormon Gulch when the red and black hounds trotting along beside the pack horse suddenly let out growls and raised their hackles. Almost at the same time Trace caught the tang of bacon smoke in his nostrils.

"Men camped below us somewhere," he guessed. The dogs had come in closer and were gazing down into the underbrush and trees. Their hackles stayed upraised.

"Somebody you know and don't like, huh?" the hunter queried softly. His blue eyes squinted up. "Could be brother Boze is in the party—we ain't more than eight or ten miles from Jacques Camp. Easy, Shag—*you*, Lobe! Quiet, now!"

In another minute he spotted the camp down there on a little flat above the Gulch. A frown gathered his straight brows together.

"Prospect party?" he grunted, then shook his head. "Ten horses tethered to a rope circlin' a bush—two of them horses standin' full packed. The rest saddled an' cinches tight. Fella standin' guard off on a shelf rock where he can see the road. Another hombre crouched by a granite boulder and hugging a rifle . . ." Trace Sunday's lips moved as he tallied them off. Suddenly he caught his breath.

"That gent with the rifle over the boulder is Boze Sunday! The ornery big grizzly! He saw me comin' down the trail and is waitin' to see who I am. Now just why the double-H is Boze so wall-eyed boogery?" The two dogs were watching

Trace, with lop ears cocked and questioning looks in their almost human brown eyes. Those big hounds would give their lives for their adored master as quick as they'd wolf down a chunk of cooked venison. They could read every flicker of expression on his face and their understanding of even his inner feelings was sometimes uncanny.

He was about to sing out when the idea came to him to give his brother's party a surprise. Grinning to himself, he pulled the horses out of sight into a little swale. The dogs followed silently when he snapped his fingers. Neither the horses or the dogs made a sound moving through the thick carpet of pine needles on the ground.

THE two oldest Sunday boys were holed up with six other men on a high ridge overlooking Mormon Gulch. Their camp was hidden in a stand of towering sugar pine, but from over where young Clinton DeWitt stood guard on a shelving rock you could see down into the Gulch to where the stage road twisted along the bottom.

It had taken a full year for the Civil War to reach across some fifteen hundred miles of Indian country and furnish Deering and Bozeman Sunday with a first-grade excuse to break off long smoldering relations with their father, Old Man King Sunday. When the break came they made a good job of it. In the name of the War they had stolen every flake or ingot of gold Sunday Mines had in the big safe at Jacques Camp. And now they were waiting to knock off the stage and grab King Sunday's private hoard, including a fabled nugget called The Lady, which even they were not too sure really existed except as a figment of the Old Man's brooding imagination.

"If there's any such thing as The Lady, we'll be cuppin' her golden form in our hands inside of an hour," Dee Sunday told his brother, with an avaricious gleam in his hard, dark eyes. "For twenty-two years The Lady has taken the place of our mother in the Old Man's heart—and he's bragged about that chunk of gold till the fable runs through every gold camp in the West. But no man's ever set eyes on it except King himself."

"But The Lady'll be on that stage with the rest of the Old Man's secret cache. King figgers we're to hell an' gone with the loot we got, so he's sneakin' The Lady down to the bank in Sacramento—if our tip's straight—and it better be." Boze shot a dark glance at one of the bearded men squatting against a huge tree trunk.

"It's straight," Cash Beacon growled.

Deering Sunday let his glance play over Beacon and the other two who were Boze's cronies. The pair who made up the balance of the party were Joady Lane and Les Birmingham, scouts for Colonel Sibley who had come with young Clinton DeWitt, seeking California gold for the Confederate Army. Dee knew his single-handed game was dangerous, but he did not intend to come out the loser.

His biggest fear was Boze.

The toughest and most dangerous man in the party, by any standard, was Bozeman Sunday. He weighed two hundred and nine pounds without an ounce of fat on his thick body. He had powerful arms that could break a man's back—and had done so. His face was squarish and dark, and the thick mane of hair came down low over his forehead, almost touching the bony ridges that rose sharply over bright and wicked eyes.

Boze stood over the campfire now, tipping the last cup of scalding coffee to his lips. The tin cup dropped suddenly from his fingers. It hit smoke-blackened rocks and splashed into the coals to send up a hissing cloud of steam and ashes.

Boze swore hoarsely. "Damn my wishbone, Dee! There's a hombre ridin' up yonder that favors our skulkin' timber-wolf of a kid brother . . ."

Dee Sunday straightened and looked up through the trees. Dee was taller than Boze, but leaner. His eyes were sober brown where Boze's were green as the thick bottom of a wine bottle. Dee's nose was long and fine shaped and he had a hard, straight mouth. He looked every inch the Southern gentleman he intended to be when this War Between the States was over and he had married young Clinton DeWitt's sister down in Georgia. Georgia was a long way from California, but Deering Sunday had cultivated a taste for high living when he'd gone to school with Clint in Charlestown.

Sibley would never see the gold they were taking over the mountains. With the lovely Mollie DeWitt — and the gold — Dee could take his place as a Southern aristocrat. He'd have a hundred black slaves and live like a king, after the fool Yankees had their ears knocked back. The only thing he really worried about was the chance of running into a bad snowstorm crossing the High Sierra. Snow was already visible on the high peaks like Antelope and Leavitt, and there was a chill cut to the brisk wind that now swept up-canyon. Dee knew a Sierra Nevada blizzard could knock this whole scheme into a cocked hat.

He gave his quick, hard laugh now. He had seen the rider cross an open glade above their camp.

"Your eyes aren't deceiving you, Boze. That's Trace towing his buckskin pack horse." He glanced over to the shelf-rock and grinned.

"Clint makes a hell of a guard. All he can think about is the gold we're 'confiscating' from Northern sympathizers for Colonel Sibley in Santa Fe. Clint's a zealot and gentleman with a poet's heart. He'd make a right handsome husband for little Nugget, but he'll never make a soldier."

Boze growled and his sandy brows lowered. "To hell with Clint DeWitt. I'm wonderin' where Trace'll stand in this ruckus twixt us and the Old Man. For half a nip of redeye likker I'd lay my rifle over a boulder and meet brother Trace with a lead slug."

"Pull up the slack in your killer instincts," Deering told him sharply, with a quick look at the five men lounging on the ground. The three tough recruits from Jacques Camp were grinning broadly, but the two rebels who had come out with Clint DeWitt looked uneasy.

"We've got time to palaver with Trace and find out what brings him down out of the mountains," Dee pointed out, dropping his voice so only Boze could hear.

"Maybe he's heard how we stole the Old Man's gold," Boze grumbled. His big head wagged from side to side like a worried bear.

"We didn't steal that gold," Dee snapped impatiently. "We just took what the Old Man was saving for us when he kicks off this big Green Apple. King Sunday's always been too mule-headed to cut us in for a real share of Sunday Mines. He insisted on controlling the purse strings even when you worked up to mine super and I took over most of the legal and paper work. We just slaved for wages—and bided our time. Clint DeWitt and the Civil War handed us the excuse we've been waiting for."

Dee's long cleft chin was sticking out and his lips were thinner than ever. "Sibley sent Clint to California for gold, and Clint came to me. I cut you into the deal and you rounded up a few more 'recruits' to take by force what was ours to begin with. This shipment coming down the Gulch will be our last haul."

Boze checked the powder and lead in his breech-loader, making sure the cap was on good and snug. He walked over to the clearing's edge and squatted down behind a big rock.

"I won't peg lead at Trace," he promised with an ugly grin, "unless he turns out hostile . . ."

II

ABOUT A MINUTE later Trace Sunday stepped silently into the clearing, the dogs at his heels. His voice came with soft humor. "Howdy, boys! What you layin' for, Boze—grizzly, maybe?"

Every man in the camp jumped as though he had been shot. While the rest of them froze there, Boze lumbered to his feet and swung around with the rifle jutting up in his hands. The big man snarled a curse.

"You damned Injun. It's beggin' a gut shot to coyote up on a man that way."

Trace's voice stayed mild. "Especially when a man's boogery, huh? What's on your conscience, Boze?"

Deering had spun around on the seat of his pants, and now he laughed. Over on the ledge Clint DeWitt had turned startled eyes, and the rest of them looked sheepish.

Dee got up and put out his hand. "How are you, boy? You tired of the lobo life? Haven't laid eyes on you for a coon's age."

Trace just grinned and looked around the camp. "Sunday school picnic?" he inquired. His eyes were on young Clint.

DeWitt came in trailing his gun, looking as if somebody had put cockleburs in his bed. What Trace saw was a clean kid of about nineteen. He had soft dark eyes and there was curly brown hair poking out from under a battered felt hat. His clothes were shabby, but his back was as straight as if a pitchfork handle had been poked down inside his collar.

He smiled at Trace. "Reckon I'm not much of a guard, suh."

Clint DeWitt had no military training. He knew he was on a dangerous mission, that the very lives of his two companions were in his hands. So far his luck was running high. He didn't hold that confiscating gold from California northern sympathizers was stealing. He had come to Dee Sunday for help because he knew Dee was in love with his sister Mollie down in Georgia.

Dee had assured him the gold they were getting was his own rightful heritage. But though Clint admired Dee in some ways, he didn't more than half trust him, at that. And as for the hulking big brother called Bozeman, there was a healthy fear in Clint whenever the hot, dull gaze of Boze happened to come his way.

But Trace's eyes were level and smiling, and full of crinkly humor, and there was also a keenness in them that seemed akin to the chill cut of the wind that swept up through the trees. Clint reckoned he liked Trace best of all the Sunday boys. He wondered where the hunter stood in regard to the Cause.

"You done as good as Boze," Trace told him, his smile broadening, and his hand going back in the air behind him to show the dogs they were to stay put.

Boze spoke up again, with a bald lie. He didn't like the way Trace's glance slid easily around the camp, taking everything in. "This is a prospect trip, kid," Boze said. "We aim to locate a few more claims for Sunday Mines."

Trace raised his eyebrows and winked at Clint. "Kind of heavy heeled for prospectin', ain't you, Boze? And why'd you have a guard over there, suckin' his thumb and gazin' at the sky?"

"You ask too many questions, kid," Boze grunted, while Clint DeWitt felt his face get redder. "Was you on the way into Jacques Camp?"

Trace grinned once more. "Looks like we're both on the pump handle. Matter of fact, I am goin' home. I was wonderin' if maybe you boys could give me the low down on a note I got from Dad." He didn't mention the stories he had heard about the Sunday family bust-up.

Bozeman Sunday started another growled curse, but Dee cut in quickly. "Shut up, Boze."

He swabbed out a tin cup with some leaves jerked from a buckthorn bush. He filled the cup with coffee and passed it to Trace. Dee's grin was as easy as Trace's.

"Don't tell me Dad finally decided to cut you into the family misfortunes, son."

Trace squatted on the ground and balanced the cup on one knee. He took out a folded sheet of paper and spread it on the other.

"This here's the message he sent up to Injun Jim's, three-four weeks ago. I was hoping you could tell me what he wants, Dee."

Deering kept his eyes on the fresh smoke he was rolling. "What's it say?" he grunted, the sulphur match he had torn from a square block jerking in the corner of his mouth.

"Just two four-letter words," Trace told him. "'Come home!' That's all it says, except Dad put his name underneath, big and scrawly, the way he always signs it. Dee, can't you give me some idea what it's all about?" He was already wondering why the brothers didn't tell him something about the argument they were supposed to have had with old King Sunday.

But Dee shook his head, and his arrogant face remained unreadable. "I got no more idea than Adam's speckled bell mare," he said.

Trace shrugged and put away the note.

Boze got up now and sauntered to the edge of the bluff. He gazed into the gulch, then glanced up at the long bars of sunlight slanting down through the trees.

"'Bout two hours past noon," Trace said baldly. "What you waitin' for, Boze?"

BOZEMAN whirled around, then stalked back to the dead fire. His eyes were burning with green lights. He had always hated Trace and his two big dogs. Now he swore explosively and turned to Dee.

"The kid's either got to be with us," he snarled, "or against us. Go ahead and spread the hide on the fence. We'll see which way he aims to part his hair."

Dee nodded and flicked his smoke down into the ashes of the fire. "I reckon you know there's a war on, Trace, even if you have been livin' with the mountain lions way up in the timber." He pointed to a thin pencil of smoke that twisted up from the ashes, where his cigarette had landed.

"That smoke is bendin' towards the south, Trace. Which side are *you* pullin' for?"

Trace laughed and squatted down to rub Lobe's drooping ears. Both dogs were hunched there beside him, and their mournful eyes never left Bozeman Sunday. There wasn't any hate in their eyes, but just a steady watchfulness.

Trace spoke almost dreamily. "My sympathy's all with the dumb brutes on both sides—I mean the four-legged ones. The horses and mules an army's got to have. Think how the poor critters'll get slaughtered, just because men ain't got no better sense."

Dee caught a curse between thin lips. "You know what I mean," he insisted. "Are you North or South?"

Trace stood up, almost lazily, and his blue eyes were squinted more than usual. He scratched his back against a tree. The two hounds came to their feet beside him and the muscles kind of rippled under their sleek skins.

"I ain't either one or t'other," he told them. "Just independent, like the grizzlies and the deer an' antelope."

Surprisingly, it was Clinton DeWitt who spoke up now, breaking into something Dee started to say. "Does that mean you're a free agent, suh? I understand you know these Sierra trails better than any other man. Perhaps I could hire you as a guide, suh. If it should storm . . ."

Trace saw Boze and Dee exchange quick glances. Then Bozeman's green eyes swung his way, while Dee shrugged.

"It happens," Trace told DeWitt, "that I got another chore afoot. But I'll give you some advice. If you're crossing the mountains, the high passes, you better rattle your hocks."

He swung around to face his brothers, and now his grin held a sardonic twist. "So Boze and Dee are Johnny Rebs! Well, I'm still my own man."

He lifted his hand in salute and swung toward the forest trail that led back toward his horses. But Bozeman Sunday reached out a big hand and spun him around. The oldest Sunday brother's face was an ugly red.

"By God, you're either with us — or against us. Now that you've stumbled onto us here—"

"That's right, Trace," Dee put in tersely. His eyes were now cold as chunks of ice. "We're in a dangerous game, me an' Boze. Not to mention young DeWitt here. We've bit off a chew that it's either swallow or choke on. Like Clint says, we can use you, if you're so minded."

He added softly, after ten second's silence, "If you ain't, we might have to get rough. I'd hate that, Trace."

Leisurely Trace allowed his gaze to rove the camp. In turn it touched his brothers, Clint DeWitt and the other two rebels, and finally Bozeman Sunday's three tough *compadres*. He knew he was up against a rugged proposition. He had been a fool to walk into this camp above Mormon Gulch — *above the stage road*. That thought locked in Trace's mind while his eyes were still traveling the circle.

His lids squinted up a little tighter, the only sign on his tanned, lean face. And then he was spinning on the balls of his feet with a blur of motion that caught them all asleep at the switch.

HE had Boze gripped by one elbow and the back of the neck. Twisting his lithe body sideways, he gave a mighty heave. The startled Boze went up and over, rolling across Trace's shoulders like a whiskey barrel going down the rack. In the next second Boze landed solidly on the hard ground. His breath went out in a whooshing sound.

In the same stark second that Boze hit the ground Trace voiced a sharp order to his dogs. "Shag—Lobo! Hold 'im!"

The dogs lunged forward eagerly, their ears laid back and gleaming fangs exposed. Fierce growls stirred in their throats as they froze there over Bozeman's throat, waiting Trace's next order.

"Hold!" Trace barked the word again,

while his long rifle swung up to cover the rest of the startled group. Then he spoke up harshly.

"Set tight, everybody, and you won't get hurt. Boze, you'd best not wiggle a whisker, or them dogs'll rip out your throat before even I can stop 'em."

Boze gurgled, but lay still, his green eyes popping out and sweat rolling out on his face. Dee stood there across the campfire, his breath coming out slowly, his handsome, arrogant face set and tight.

"All right, son," he spoke now. "Between the bunch of us we could get you, easy. But it might cost Boze a ripped jugular. It's your move."

Trace nodded, while Clint DeWitt watched the big dogs with a shudder. "I'll deal with you, Dee, but I don't trust Boze. My guess is the both of you—and Clint DeWitt—are all fryin' different fish over the same fire. Some of you, maybe all of you, are goin' to get burnt before the party's over. Now you'd ought to know, Dee, that I don't give two hoots in a holler tree what kind of sonofagun you're cookin'. So I ain't likely to spill any part of it."

He let that sink in a minute, then went on. "I'll let Boze up and call off my dogs, if you'll agree I'm still a free agent. I'll take your word, Dee."

It was Boze's scared whimper that gave him his first answer. "Let 'im go, Dee! Let the damn' hellion get outa camp, afore these blood-hungry mutts bite into my throat!"

And Deering nodded. "Call off your hounds, son, and ride to hell an' gone for all I care. Only don't linger about it, because we've got a long horse to curry and time is of the essence."

III

THE BIG STAGECOACH lurched and swayed like a drunken man as it came down through Mormon Gulch. Up front old Stacey Gordon divided his attention between driving his four-horse team, and staying on his perch.

"Damndest road I ever seen," Stacey muttered, through his drooping black mustache. His long muscular arms were cocked like steel springs as he gripped the lines. "Feller that fust laid it out must of been following a gut-shot buck deer. I'm danged if I don't trade my whip for a gold pan at the end of this run."

Stacey Gordon couldn't have been pried loose from his hazardous occupation for gold, whiskey or women, but next to "skinning" a stagecoach team his chief pleasure was bellyaching about the job.

Besides a canvas mail sack and the usual clutter of light freight in the rack behind him, Stacey had three passengers and a heavy wooden box inside. The box was marked "Ore Samples — Sunday Mines" and was consigned to an assayer at Sacramento. Because of its heft the stage driver had put the box inside the coach.

The whiskey drummer and an idle miner disgruntled at hanging around Jacques Camp waiting for the Independence Mine to open, had bought their tickets early and climbed into their seats as soon as the team was backed into position. Then, just before Stacey Gordon was ready to pull out, the girl they called Nugget Sunday had got in, after giving old Stacey an impudent grin and showing her ticket.

At the last minute King Sunday himself came roaring along the street to fling open the stage door and unceremoniously drag his adopted daughter out. They'd had a brief row there on the plank walk, King demanding to know where the Hades she thought she was going. Almost grimly, her brown face now paler, Nugget had asked Stacey to wait a minute, then the pair of them had stalked around the corner of the stage office where they could finish their squabble in comparative private. Which had struck Stacey as queer, because the Sundays were always rowing, and seldom bothered to keep their battles private.

Then in a minute or two, King had come back and got in the stage himself, snarling at the other passengers to make room. Then he had bawled at Stacey to get the coach moving. King Sunday's leonine face had been black with rage.

They had rattled off down the street, leaving Nugget standing there on the boards, her own beautiful, dark features colored with something akin to stark fear. In a last glance thrown over his shoulder, Stacey had seen the girl fling herself around suddenly and go striding back up the hill, every line of her slim back

showing her proud and wilful disposition, and her anger at being hauled off the stage by her foster-father.

The scene back there in Jacques Camp had made Stacey uneasy. He wondered what kind of ruckus Old King Sunday was sticking his stubborn head into now. From the stories Stacey had heard, the two oldest Sunday boys had joined up with some guerrilla outfit, then lifted every dollar of cash working capital Sunday Mines had in Jacques Camp—which was probably considerable, as they paid wages in gold—and had lit out for the hills.

Old King Sunday refused to talk publicly about the affair, and one look at his terrible face on the street was enough to make any man hesitate to ask personal questions. He shut down the Independence Mine, throwing forty or fifty men out of work. Ever since he had spent most of his time shut up in his big house on the hill, brooding darkly over the way all three of his sons had turned out. Most people figured it served the high-handed old tycoon right.

Stacey was jolted out of his thoughts by a bellowing voice from below.

"Ear down them hosses a minute, Stace! I'm gittin' up there with you—" King Sunday had his massive, gray-thatched head poked out the window of the stage door. He reached up with a gold-headed cane he always carried, and punched Stacey Gordon on the seat of the pants.

"Halt the stage, I say. Blast you, Stacey, pull 'er down!"

When Stacey got the stage stopped the old man got out and began clambering stiffly up beside the driver. He was some hampered by his heavy cane and the ancient, battered, over-and-under combination rifle and shotgun he carried.

"Here," he ordered, shoving the gun up into Stacey Gordon's lap and tucking the cane under one of his own thick arms. Grunting and snorting, he managed to haul his big body up into the seat.

"What the thunderation you aim to do with this old bear killer, Mr. Sunday?" Stacey mumbled, at the same time wondering why the old man wanted to ride with him anyway. "Goin' to put it in the Spanish Museum in Sacramento?"

"I might cut timber with it while we're goin' down the road," King answered, his square, seamy face red with the exertion of climbing over the wheel. "Now git this sorry hearse rollin', Gordon, afore somethin'—"

A scared bleat from the whiskey drummer came now from below. The peddler had stuck his head out of the window, one white hand clinging to his hat. "If there's going to be some trouble, Mr. Sunday, going through this Mormon Gulch, I don't know as I—"

"Then git out an' walk!" King Sunday roared back.

But the argument was cut short when Stacey Gordon gave a shrug expressive of vast indifference, and let his whip unfurl gently to flick across the round rumps of his wheelers. The stagecoach started with a creaking jerk, and the whiskey drummer had to pull his head in quick or get it bashed against a tree.

A mile ahead of the stage, where hemming cliffs pinched the gulch to a narrow pass, Dee and Boze Sunday were already placing their gun hands at strategic points for the hold-up.

TRACE was riding a deer trail along the timbered flank above Mormon Gulch when he heard the stagecoach rattle past on the road below.

Because he had been forced to climb back to the pocket where his horses waited, it had been impossible to drop into the gulch past the rebel camp. Now he heard the stage, but could not see it through the trees. So he did not see Old King Sunday riding the high seat beside Stacey Gordon.

Trace had a pretty good idea his brothers intended to stop that stage to take off any gold that might be on it. But he had a stubborn indifference to what transpired. There was a minute there when he had yanked out his rifle and laid his finger on the trigger, with half a notion to send a warning shot over the trees that shielded the stagecoach. But there was a mirthless grin on his lips when he shrugged and poked the gun back into its sheath.

"Why should I spike Dee and Boze's game?" he mumbled. "The more stinkin' yellow gold they pack outa the Sierras, the sweeter'll be the atmosphere!"

So he gigged his horse along the trail, clucked to his dogs and let the stage jounce

on down the gulch. In another minute the sound of its grinding wheels had faded, muffled in the shrouding timber.

The deer trail skirted a ledge and angled downward. The trees thinned out. Shag and Lobo had been ranging ahead, but now they stopped and cocked their ears. Trace's pack horse had whickered twice before he heard the fast thudding of hoofs coming down the gulch.

Trace yanked his pony to a halt, frowning. A man didn't fog his mount like that without a reason, unless he was some tenderfoot—

"Bustin' a cinch to overtake the stage," he guessed shrewdly. "Now what the—"

THE rider pounded into sight. Trace stiffened in the saddle. That slim figure, riding like a cowpuncher born in the saddle, hatless and with black hair streaming out in the breeze . . .

Trace swore once, dropped his cotton lead rope and gave his horse both heels in a hard jab that sent the animal forward with a grunt of surprise. With one hand he yanked out his rifle, poked it into the air and pulled the trigger. Then he gave attention to his riding, veering to cut off the hard-pounding horse on the road.

Words squeezed out between his lips in jerky syllables. "Nugget Sunday, the little she-wildcat—ridin' like a scalped Injun and headin' smack-dab into a stage holdup!"

The girl looked up at the sharp crack of a rifle up the slope. Then she saw the buckskin clad figure bearing down on her, angling so as to hit a little hump in the road about the same time she did. Riding hell-bent that way, she didn't have time to see who it was trying to run—or shoot her down. Trace could tell by the way she leaned forward over her piebald horse's neck that she was yelling in the animal's ear. It was a stunt she used to pull when she was a long legged kid in pigtails, to get the last notch of speed out of her horse.

Trace grinned and gave his horse another drubbing with his heels, wishing he was in the habit of wearing spurs. It was seldom he ever was called on to put his mount to a test of speed. But he knew his big bay could overtake Nugget's short-coupled paint horse without half trying. And then suddenly his face went a little grim, the smile fading.

Nugget was twisting in her saddle—already a little past the hump in the road—and her hand clutched a pistol! Without any hesitation at all she cut one shot into the air about a foot above his head.

Then her pale face disappeared behind her shoulder again and she roweled her paint with a pair of Mexican spurs Trace himself had given her, years ago.

Trace's pony lunged out into the road now, a dozen lengths behind the girl. He raised his voice and let out a yell. "Nugget—doggone you, girl! It's me—Trace Sunday. Pull up, girl, pull up!"

She twisted around once more, straightening in the saddle, but still hanging onto the pistol. And then abruptly she hauled her lathered paint horse to a dust-throwing stop. She was so weak in the knees to think she had almost shot her favorite foster brother that she had to take it out in blazing female anger.

"Trace Sunday—you worthless, drifting saddlebum! What kind of girl-chasing devil have you turned into, anyhow?" The girl was trembling with combined anger at herself for not knowing who he was, fear that she'd come mighty close to putting a piece of lead in him; and worry for what she was sure might be happening in Mormon Gulch this very minute.

"You gave me one heck of a turn," she finished lamely. And then suddenly she grinned. "But darn it, Trace, I'm sure glad to see you!" And she leaned across the narrow gap between their horses and gave him a tight hug and a kiss.

"M-m-m!" Trace squeezed and kissed her back, then sat sideways in the saddle and feasted his eyes on her dark, fiery loveliness. "Dogged if that wasn't worth the chase. Want to do it again?"

She laughed and made a futile try at straightening her wind-blown hair. "The kiss, or the race?" she mocked him. And then all banter slid from her and she reached out to grab Trace's buckskin sleeve.

"Trace—you must be answering Dad's message, after all—only it's too late—"

He nodded absently, keeping his ears strained for any sound of guns from down-gulch. "I answered it soon's I got it—which was only a few days ago. What's

it mean, and why is it too late? You mean there's any truth in these wild yarns I been hearin' about Dee and Boze bustin' up with King?"

"Dad wanted you to find their hide-out in the mountains — nobody knows the Sierras like you, Trace. Nobody could do it but you."

Something died within Trace in that minute. Ever since he'd got that note at Injun Jim's he'd been nursing the hope that the Old Man wanted him home because he forgave him for Carmen Sunday's death. It hurt with the pain of a knife twisting in his chest to know that even now there was only one thing Old Man King Sunday wanted—to get back his gold. He'd figured Trace was the only hope he had to trail down his two oldest sons and the gold they had stolen.

His lips were already curling in a bitter laugh when the rattle of gunfire came up the gulch on the growing wind.

Nugget's hand came up across her mouth, twisting it out of shape. Her eyes grew large and very dark. And then she swayed in the saddle and Trace had to reach out quick to steady her. Her fingers clutched at him and a whisper was torn from her lips.

"It — it's happened! The stagecoach — *Trace, Dad is on that stage!*"

IV

THE STAGE HOLD-UP in Mormon Gulch was over and done with by the time Trace Sunday and his little foster sister got there. Things were in a mess.

The first thing they saw was the big coach itself, turned over in the creek beside the road, its four wheels sticking up in the air. The top was all caved in where it had landed upside down on the rocks and one of the wheel horses was lying dead in its harness. The other three horses were gone.

Old King Sunday was sitting on the bank at the back end of the stage, holding his head in both hands. His face was grey.

Trace and Nugget heard the old man talking as they rode up. "You damned rebel sonofa — I'd ought to leave you there, pinned down under the coach. Let you freeze to death in the blizzard that's due to hit by nightfall."

And they heard a soft voice with a Southern drawl make answer, from down there somewhere under the crushed stage.

"Yes, suh," the voice said, and there wasn't a sign of a whimper in it. "Don't waste any more time on me, Mister Sunday, suh. You better see what you can do with Deering, over there across the road. I thought I heard him breathe."

Nugget threw herself off her horse and ran toward the old man. Trace also dismounted, but while he did so, ran a practiced eye around the hold-up scene.

Stacey Gordon lay sprawled in the road, and it needed only a glance to tell he'd never tool another stagecoach, unless he rolled them through the clouds up yonder. The same went for the two shabbily-dressed rebels Trace had seen in the forest camp with his brothers. They huddled near together over the brush, where bullets had cut them down. One of Boze's Jacques Camp gun-slicks was farther up the bank on the far side of the creek, his head hanging grotesquely down over some boulders. A miner and some dude lay dead, shot in the back. Passengers, likely.

And Deering Sunday lay humped against the trunk of a sugar pine. His eyes were closed, his face almost dead-white, and his fawn-colored vest was stained red with blood. Trace couldn't tell for sure if Dee was dead or alive.

There wasn't a sign anywhere of Bozeman Sunday or the other two Jacques Camp renegades.

"I knowed Boze has always been half loco with gold fever, and poison ornery besides," Old King Sunday, said, looking up at the girl and Trace without apparent surprise—or too stupefied by the events to feel any. "But I never figured to see him go plumb kill crazy the way he done awhile ago. I already done what I could for Dee—he's bad off but might live. Now I been tryin' to hist the stage off this damned curly haired young rebel, only the bashing Boze give me with a rifle barrel kind of sapped my strength. Gimme a hand, Trace, and we'll see if there's enough left to the Johnny Reb to be worth hangin'."

Clinton DeWitt was pinned under the crushed top of the stage. "I'm not hurt much," he told Trace, when the hunter knelt down to take a look. "Just a busted

arm, suh—and a few bruises. I've let Colonel Sibley's foray come a cropper."

Together Trace and King Sunday got hold of one edge of the overturned stage and hoisted it up a few inches. Clint dragged himself out under his own steam and sat there on the ground, shaking a little with the reaction and the increasing cold. "I'm your prisoner, suh," he told King Sunday gravely.

THERE was a tender expression in the girl's wind-reddened face as she got a thick wool blanket out of the stagecoach and wrapped it around the unconscious Dee, after inspecting the crude bandage Old King had put on his chest.

"It'll do until we can get him to a doctor," she told them, walking back. "Poor Dee! A born gentleman, but a shade too greedy. Was it Boze that shot him, Dad?"

King Sunday nodded his gray-maned head. His lined features were set, and Trace knew the Old Man was suffering a whole lot more on the inside than he was from any belt on the head.

"Boze and Cash Beacon and that other son skun out with every ounce of gold I had in my private cache. I had it in a box marked 'ore samples' and I was aimin' to bank it all in Sacramento or Frisco. I had The Lady in there, too—the chunk of gold I was aimin' to give Nugget here for a wedding present some day. I don't give a damn about all the rest of the filthy yellow stuff Boze got, but I hate to lose The Lady nugget, though it looks like the luck she's always brought me has sure played out its string."

King Sunday laughed bitterly. "Don't think," he told Trace, "that I'm tryin' to pass the buck onto somebody else for raising my family all wrong. I don't blame you for not putting a hump on it when I sent you that note. I guess you knew I'd never have tried to call you in except for my own damn selfish reasons. Gold! I wish it had all turned to dust before ever man appeared on earth. Poison, that's what it is. Gleaming yellow poison, put in the ground by some higher power, so fools like me could wreck their lives over it. Trace, what are we going to do now?"

Trace looked around at the dead men sprawled on the ground. "How much of this was done by Boze and his gun slicks?"

"All of it except the feller that was one of them. Stacey Gordon gunned that one down before Cash Beacon put a bullet in his heart. Boze drove the team off the bank on purpose to turn the stage over on Dee and the rebel feller. Dee ducked out from under and Boze shot him, cold turkey. Him or the other two did for the pair of southern boys yonder. Then, before Boze rapped me on the head with a rifle barrel, he swore he'd melt down The Lady and pour it into bullets to stop anybody that came into the Sierras after him. I only hope they freeze in the storm that's comin'."

"We can't count on it," Trace muttered, half to himself, but loud enough to be heard. "I'm goin' after Boze and them other two, Dad."

King Sunday heaved a sigh that came from deep within his troubled soul. "We'll go together, boy. But before we start I'll tell you something none of you ever knew except Bozeman himself. Your and Dee's mother was my second wife, Trace. The first was a quarter-blood Sioux, and Boze was over a year old when I married her. She was drinkin' when I met her, and she drank herself to death within another year. Later I met Carmen, who mothered Dee and you—and finally Nugget's aunt Kate, who is still puttin' up with my cussedness. So Bozeman ain't your brother, nor my son, though I've done more for him, a hundred times over, than I ever did for you."

The old man turned to the girl then, on the heels of creaking sounds from down the gulch road. "That's one of my freight wagons comin' now, trailin' the horses that busted loose when the coach overturned. Nugget, you game to take Dee and the dead ones into Jacques Camp? Dee'll maybe have a chance yet, if he's got to a doctor soon. If he lives he'll stand charges for complicity in these killin's."

Nugget agreed promptly, but there was an odd light in her dark eyes as she asked, "How about Mr. Clinton DeWitt?"

Trace and Old King had pointedly ignored DeWitt in all the talk. He had been sitting a little apart, curly head erect against the bole of a tree, teeth clenched against the pain of his broken arm.

King Sunday growled a baffled curse. He appealed to Trace. "What'll we do

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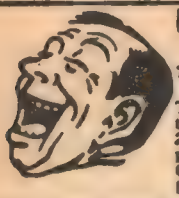

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with him, son? Hell, I'm Northern by persuasion, but I'm no soldier. I don't want a prisoner-of-war on my hands."

"By your leave, suh," DeWitt spoke up suddenly, with a motion of his good arm. "If you'll be kind enough to set this arm for me, I'd like to help you recover that gold."

Trace cut him a sharp look. "I expect we'll have to fight a storm — maybe all night. Don't know as I'd want to be nursin' a wounded man."

King Sunday covered his admiration for the kid's courage with a heavy scowl. "We'll set your busted wing, kid. But if you insist on tagging after us on this chore, you'll get no coddlin'."

Clint DeWitt smiled briefly. "Then it's settled, suh. Afterward, you can dispose of me as you wish."

V

THE FIRST SWIRLING SNOW, arriving even before they left the hold-up scene, would have made tracking a man impossible. Trace didn't even try.

All along, he'd had a strong and persistent hunch where Dee and Boze might have cached their stolen gold.

"I reckon they never told you, Dad," he told the old man, "but years ago the two of 'em throwed up a log cabin deep in the mountains where they went sometimes to hunt. I doubt if anybody else knows where it is but me. It's built on the front of a cave. I'm dead certain Boze'll head for there."

He had sent his dogs and packhorse along with Nugget and the freight wagon, after getting some grub, a bottle of whiskey and his long sheepskin coat out of the pack.

The freight wagon driver had loaned King a big furry bearskin coat that made him look like a hunched grizzly astride Dee's big claybank horse.

Clint DeWitt had caught his own mount and wore his own grey overcoat and saddle slicker. The Georgian's face looked pale under his hatbrim as he trailed the other two in respectful silence. His left arm made a bulky place across his chest, under the coat. They hadn't got so much as a grunt of pain out of him when they stretched his arm out and let the bone snap into place, though there was blood inside his mouth where his teeth had sunk into his tongue.

They had left Mormon Gulch far behind now, and were working into very rough country. The wind had died, but the snow came down steadily, making it hard to see in the failing light of day. King Sunday began to look worried.

"You reckon we can find our way, Trace? It'll soon be dark, and unless I'm mistaken this calm only means a hell-twister's liable to bust loose afore long."

Trace nodded confidently. "It'll take us hours of hellish goin' if the storm gets bad. But I know these mountains like the palm of my hand. There's an old fire burn ahead, runs for miles. The cabin's at the yonder end of it. We can't go far wrong with the edge of the burn to follow."

After awhile Trace said abruptly, "How'd you come to be on that stage, Dad? An' I don't savvy how Nugget knew—"

King chuckled inside the muffling collar of his bearskin coat. There was frosty rime clinging on the fur where his white breath blew across it.

"I figgered to send that box unguarded, but Nugget, the smart little dickens, found out Cash Beacon had been hangin' around town for a week, then disappeared suddenly yesterday mornin'. Nugget allowed it didn't look like any coincidence, and she aimed to ride that stage herself, just in case her hunch proved right. I like to of

tanned her good when I drug her off the stage and got it out of her."

And then, with startling suddenness, the wind came back. It screamed up the mountain flanks to lash the trees around the three men. Snow that had come to rest on still branches was shaken off into the wind to make blinding, swirling curtains.

Trace bellowed words to the others which the wind snatched hungrily from his lips: "Amigos — we're in for one hell of a night!"

IN THE old log cabin Cash Beacon and the other renegade were playing cards. There was a whiskey bottle and several small bags of gold dust on the hewn plank table.

Boze Sunday had turned into one of the bunks in a corner of the single room. His bulky figure cast a grotesque shadow on the chinked log wall, and his drunken snore punctuated the other renegades' infrequent mutterings. The three of them had played cards beside a roaring blaze in the open fireplace since arriving at the cabin after dark last night.

Cash shifted his hot gaze from Boze's back to the hanging deerskin that covered the mouth of a cave at the back wall. That cave held close to fifty thousand dollars in gold ingots and sacked dust—about one hundred fifty pounds all tallied!

He laid down his cards and got up to rub a sleeve across the cabin's only window. The howling gale had died with the dawn, and Cash looked out on a world of still whiteness.

"She was a heller," the outlaw grunted, "while she lasted."

His long face was ugly as he swung back and once more stared toward Boze. "The damn' big grizzly is asleep," he mumbled to Bodie Gurn, the other man. "Clutchin' that Lady nugget like it was a honkytonk queen—"

He hunched down over the table again. "Listen, Bodie. There's a young fortune waitin' back there in the cave. We risked our lives to get it, didn't we?"

Bodie nodded. "Sure we did. But what—"

"Sh-h-h!" Cash leaned forward. "What's to prevent us from puttin' a bul-

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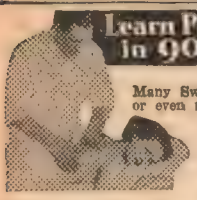
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let in Boze's dirty carcass, while he's layin' there? We're pure damned fools if we don't."

A sudden creaking movement from the bunk brought them both jerking around. Boze Sunday had heaved up in the bunk. He was pointing a pistol at the six-inch space between them. His other hand held the two-pound Lady nugget, a torso-shaped chunk of pure gold that caught the firelight with a rich gleam.

"So you aimed to kill me?" Boze's broad face was an ugly red. "You aimed to plant a slug in my back and ride out of here with all the gold. You damned loco rattlesnakes! Did you think I was fool enough to sleep?"

The faces of the other two were a pasty gray. Bodie Gurn was the first to crawl. "Don't kill us, Boze! Honest to God, we never—" His voice rose to a scream as Boze's gun jerked and roared.

The scream was chopped short and Bodie Gurn slumped over the table. One flailing arm sent the whiskey bottle crashing to the floor.

Cash Beacon was a snarling animal as he spilled backward in his chair, snatching for his gun. Boze Sunday moved his wrist two inches and triggered again. Fire stabbed from the gun barrel and a blue hole appeared in the center of Beacon's forehead. The outlaw rolled out onto the floor and lay still.

Boze's hoarse laugh was cut short as the cabin door was thrown open with abrupt suddenness. Like a stupid, blinking grizzly the big man turned and stared. The Lady nugget dropped from his loose fingers onto the floor. It made a soft thud.

Trace Sunday stood just outside the door, up to his thighs in drifted snow. A rifle slanted up in his gloved hands. On either side of him stood the Old Man and young Clint DeWitt.

They looked like three ghosts out of the stormy night just past. Snow crusted their hats and bulky overcoats and their cold-blackened faces were almost unrecognizable above turned-up collars.

Trace's blue lips moved stiffly and his voice came out in an unreal croak. "Game's up, Boze! Ante for a new hand—"

Boze's startled, cunning brain was working as he stared at the three men who

had hunted him down. There was something odd about their stiff postures and slitted red-rimmed eyes. Each of them clutched his rifle as if it was a dead branch in their numbed hands—the young rebel holding his up under his right armpit with his right hand folded around the middle.

"We're takin' yuh to Jacques Camp, Boze," old King Sunday mumbled thickly. "Where you'll likely swing for murder."

And then Boze understood why they waited there, expressionless and staring. Every one of those gents was mighty close to being frozen stiff! A chuckle came from the big man's open mouth.

He let out a sudden roar and lunged forward through the doorway. One battering arm crashed into Trace's chest, knocking him backward into the snow. Then he was covering the three of them with his pistol, ignoring the rifles of King and DeWitt that still pointed harmlessly at the open cabin door.

"I don't know how you ever made it in the blizzard," Boze snarled. "But this is sure one all right place to leave three more bodies that'll never be found!"

King Sunday moved his head stiffly. His voice came, in a thick blur. "You won't kill me, Boze. I raised you from a worthless pup. Gave you more—"

"You worked me for nothing all my life!" Boze snarled. "I sweat my guts out roddin' your big Independent Mine—rakin' gold out of the rocks so you could play the big king of your damned Sunday empire. Now, by hell, I've got a packhorse load of that gold back in the cave—and it's mine, you hear me? Every damn' ounce of it's mine! An' now, Old Man King Sunday, you're gettin' the first slug of lead in your gold-lined guts. . . ."

And his pistol jerked up.

Clint DeWitt moved suddenly, drawing on some superhuman strength. Like a snow-covered scarecrow he half-toppled, half-threw himself forward over Boze's jutting gun. The pistol roared on the heels of Clint's one forced word.

"Trace!"

Boze was cursing, trying to get his legs out of the snow and throw off Clint's leaden body at the same time. Trace fixed his gaze on Boze's hairy chin and brought up his rifle, butt first. It hit the underside

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of the big man's jaws and his head snapped back.

There was a cracking sound that seemed sharp and clear in the white, snow filled forest, even on the heels of the echoing gunshot. Boze Sunday sprawled backward into the snowdrift, his head rolling loosely on a broken neck.

It was King Sunday who brought the other two out of their frozen attitudes a couple of minutes later.

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Old King roared with laughter.

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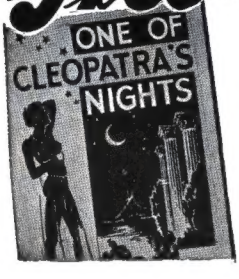

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